

Elements of Change

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Summary: Scott vs Norse; Vikings vs Celts; Two unlikely heroes must unite to settle the difference, and mend the bond, torn by pride.

Simple How to Train Your Dragon and Brave crossover. Enjoy or not as you so desire. Note: I haven't done much research on Norse or Celtic history/mythology. No flaming for inaccuracy please.

1. Chapter 1

****Set sail****

There was noise everywhere that fateful day. Men and women tumbled all over the docks filling one large ship with weapons and supplies. The tiny island surrounded by cold ocean bustled with activity, everyone excited for the send off.

Stoick, chief of the small village paced the dock, wondering if they'd ever come. This was the first time he'd be taking his son off the island, and it'd be the first time in years that they'd be visiting the homelands in years. Stoick's brother, Spitelout had gone just a few weeks before to scout the land. Stoick scanned the island once more, searching for his toothpick of a son.

He jumped when a hand placed itself on his shoulder.

"It's alright, I'm sure he'll be here soon."

Stoick looked over to see his wife, Vahallarama trying to comfort him. She was smaller in stature than the other women in the village, which explained the minuscule son of his, but he still loved her more than anyone. Despite her petite size, she was strong in words and attitude.

The stressed chief gave a heavy sigh. "I sure hope so."

Soon, the word was given for the ships to set off in a couple

minutes. Vahallarama boarded the largest ship, but just before Stoick was about to join her, two images came running down to the docks.

"WAIT!" the larger one screamed. Gobber, the blacksmith dragged a young, small boy to the ships, where he was set in front of his father.

Stoick just stood there with a scowl look on his face, his son purposefully trying to avoid meeting his eyes.

"Sorry, dad." the boy said quietly.

"Where were you?" asked Stoick, expecting a good answer.

The boy looked up at Gobber, who turned away and left to board the ship. He sighed, "I was out looking for a troll."

"A _troll_?" Stoick raised his eyebrows.

"Well, a couple of the other kids were talking about a troll in the woods, and I just thought I'd try to look for it, ya'know?"

Stoick raised his massive hands to his face, trying to convince himself that this was a good excuse for almost missing such an occasion.

"Well, there's no point in trying to lecture him out there." Vahallarama said, leaning over the side of the large ship, "Everyone get on board so we can get a move on."

Stoick nodded, then looked over to his distraught son. "Let's go, Hiccup."

****Out at Sea****

Hiccup could barely contain his excitement as soon as the tiny island of Berk was out of sight beyond the horizon. He ran up to the edge of the bow, trying to see if he could find where they were going before anyone else. Suddenly a thought came to his mind.

"Hey mom!" he called out behind him.

Vahallarama walked over to the bow where Hiccup was after she was done talking with the captain. "What is it?"

"Won't the mean dragons attack while we're gone?"

She smiled. "No dear. You see, every year the dragons don't come to our island for a couple weeks. It is that time this year now, so the dragons won't come."

"Why not?"

Vahallarama gave a puzzled look. "I'm not quite sure." She looked into her son's eyes. They seemed to be pleading with her to tell him. Hiccup was always more interested in learning things of the world rather than just going with them.

"Maybe one day you'll find out for us." she said giving him a

comforting smile.

Hiccup beamed. He always enjoyed the encouragement of his mother. She was just about the only one in the village who would give it to him.

"Vahallarama..." called a deep, concerned voice.

Both she and Hiccup turned. Stoick was standing there in the midst of the men working. His head gave a slight movement backward, indicating he wished to speak with her in private. She simply nodded, and left with him below deck. Hiccup stayed at the bow, thinking of the new things he might see off the island.

Below deck, Gobber sat waiting for the chief and his wife. When they arrived, he brought out two small stools for them to sit.

"What's all this about?" Vahallarama said as she sat down.

Stoick sighed as he looked at Gobber, who simply nodded. After giving another sigh, he looked to Vahallarama. "It's about Hiccup."

"What about Hiccup?"

"Well, you know ever since he was born, he's been...different."

"And what's wrong with different?"

Stoick was a bit surprised to hear her say this. "Well, how can I trust the village to him if I don't know what he'll do with it? I don't even know what he's doing half the time."

"Well, he told you what he was doing this afternoon didn't he?"

"Yes, he did, but did you hear what he said?"

"Hiccup may have strange ideas, but he has ambition. Plus, he's still just a child, Stoick. Give him some time. Just wait, you'll wake up one day and find out he's turned into the best chief Berk has ever seen, different or not. And don't worry," she said, standing up, "I'll help to keep him on the right path."

She kissed his forehead and left. After she was back on the main deck, Stoick turned back to Gobber.

Gobber just shrugged his shoulders. "She basically summed it all up. You can't count your chickens before they're hatched. Just give the boy a bit of time."

Stoick sighed again, but as he opened his mouth to talk, one of the men opened the door to the main deck.

"Chief! You may want to get up here and see this!"

****Attack****

Hiccup started to get bored just sitting alone, but as he looked around, all he could see was sweaty men running around the deck. He

once again looked out to the clear, open sea in front of him. His mind drifted to the dragons living near Berk. Perhaps they'd sail to where they lived. Hiccup shook his head. He remembered hearing his father say they lived in a never-ending mist surrounded by tall rocks.

As his innocent, childish mind wandered, he began to notice a small speck on the horizon. He focused in on the tiny silhouette, trying to figure out what it was. Perhaps it was land? Have they gotten to their destination already? He squinted his eyes harder. Soon he made out a sail...flags...

"Mom!" he called out, realizing she was back from below deck, "Look, a ship!"

She briskly walked up next to him as he pointed his finger to the other vessel sailing in the water. She squinted her eyes as Hiccup did before, and as it came closer, her eyes widened, recognizing the Celtic symbols on the flags.

She called to one of the men, and whispered in his ear. Afterward, he ran to below deck where the chief was, disbelief in his eyes. Soon, Stoick was where Hiccup and Vahallarama stood, and he stared at the strange ship.

"Gobber!" Stoick called, knowing his friend had followed him upstairs, "Get the men ready for battle."

"Wait," started Vahallarama, "We don't know if they're hostile. We haven't had much dealing with the Scotts in decades."

"Well, better safe than sorry." said Stoick, and he himself went to get ready.

Vahallarama turned to Hiccup, "You best get below deck, son."

Hiccup nodded, and jumped down the stairs, keeping the hatch slightly open so he could still see everything.

The ship slowly got closer, and as soon as they were parallel with their ship, Stoick began to speak very loudly.

"Heil*! What brings you across these waters?"

The entire deck was silent. Stoick's eyebrows furrowed, noticing something was wrong.

Suddenly the entire crew on the Scott's ship yelled a battle cry, and jumped onto Hiccup's boat. Everyone drew their swords, and a great battle commenced. The vikings tried to push the celts back as much as possible, but they were soon flooded with Scotts. Hiccups eyes widened to the amount of bloodshed. He'd seen the villagers fight dragons back on Berk, but to see them fighting other people was almost unbelievable. He could see his tiny, little mother in the battle, fighting alongside his massive father. The both the them almost in harmony as they fought.

The strength and skill of the vikings were enough to finally push them back to their own ship, and it became a two-ship battle. Eventually it was enough to send the Scotts off on their own ship.

Everyone cheered, yelling at them, accepting victory. Hiccup, realizing it was over, came from below deck, and ran to his mother. He bent down and hugged him, knowing he'd never seen such violence before.

Unfortunately as the Scotts sailed away, the people of Berk could see them take out bows, and shoot arrows toward them. The cheers of the vikings quickly stopped at arrows rained down on them.

"Take cover!" yelled the chief, and everyone lifted their shields.

Screams of pain were heard as a few arrows fell to where a shield could not protect their large bodies.

"Cowards!" Stoick screamed at them as they sailed farther once the arrows had finished falling.

"Mom!" screamed a choked voice amiss the shouts of scorn. Stoick recognized it, and ran to where it came from.

Vahallarama lay on the deck, blood pouring out of her back where an arrow had hit her. Hiccup was cradling her head, not knowing what to do. She had used her heavy shield to protect Hiccup when the arrows fell, leaving her body exposed.

"Vahallarama..." Stoick whispered, taking her fragile body in his arms.

She looked up into his eyes, and placed a hand on his tear-dripping cheek. All she could do was mouth the words: _Take care of Hiccup..._

The entire ship was silent as the chief's wife slowly fell away into darkness.

****Return****

After the death of Vahallarama, the ship decided to go back to Berk to bury her body. They never did get to the homelands.

* * *

><p>*An old Norse greeting to a group of men and women.<p>

2. Chapter 2

****Ten Years Later****

"Merida!" called the voice of a noble woman. A young, redhead girl turned over in her bed, tangling her frizzy hair.

"MERIDA!" called the voice again. A beautiful, slender woman strode into the small bedroom decorated with furs and weapons. "Merida, it's time to get up."

The girl groaned, and slowly sat up in her bed, her nightgown slightly slipping off her shoulder. She quickly squeezed her eyes shut as soon as her mother opened the window to let in the sunlight.

"Mum..." she groaned, "too early..."

"Th' early bird gets the worm, Merida." stated the woman, "Now get up." and with that she pulled her covers off her daughter and helped her up to get dressed.

The girl named Merida slipped into her usual dark blue dress and headed downstairs with her mother for breakfast. Just before she closed the door, she looked over to her bow that was propped neatly against her chest at the end of her bed. Sighing, she closed the door without it. Ever since her adventure the year before, she promised herself to be more diligent to her mother's lessons, as her mother promised to respect her freedom.

The two of them went down the stone steps, one seemed to be gliding, the other bounding with her red hair bouncing up and down with each step. Halfway down, the woman in her green dress stopped and glared at her daughter, who gave a sigh, straightened her back, and walked as her mother did the rest of the way down.

As the got to the dining room, a large man was sitting at one end of the table, quietly eating his large portions. Three triplets with bright red hair, much like Merida, sat to the man's left, lining an entire side of the table.

"Mornin', Fergus." said the woman, kissing the man on the head as she walked by.

Merida sat herself down at the table, her mother sitting to her right, across the table from the King.

"Merida," started the woman, "today, we will be learning about etiquette."

Merida gave a long groan. She hated etiquette more than all the other lessons, but she took a deep breath, sat up straight, and let her mother lecture about how to eat, what to say for a dinner conversation, what to avoid, etc. etc. etc.

Quietly, she did as she was told, her father and brothers leaving the table eventually. Her body did everything that was to be expected, but her face gave a continual scowl.

Suddenly, as Merida was being told to never chew with her mouth open for the thousandth time, Maudie, the maid came bustling in.

"You Majesty," she started, walking over to Merida's mother, "A messenger from Lord Macintosh is requestin' an audience with ye."

"Lord Macintosh?" she said, standing up, "did he say what about?"

"No ma'am."

"Very well then. Merida, you are excused."

Excited, the bright rush of red hair ran up the stairs for her bow and quiver. "See ye later mum!" she called.

"Be careful! And be back after noon!" the Queen called after her.

Quickly, before her mother could change her mind, Merida ran out the back door and saddled her faithful steed and companion, Angus before riding off into the woods.

****Evening****

It was dinner time, and King Fergus was telling his nightly tale of the time he faced the dreaded bear, Mor'du. The three princes quietly ate their dinner, occasionally mocking their father, emphasizing the amount of times he's told the tale. The Queen paced the room, her food and another plate untouched.

"...his hide littered with th' weapons of fallen warriors. Ah drew my sword-

"Oh, Fergus! Do you not care for your daughter at all?" she interrupted.

The puzzled King stopped. "Elinor, I'm sure she's fine! She's strong and she knows how to take care of herself."

"That's not what I meant!" Fergus gave her a puzzled look. Elinor sighed, "She's becomin' more rebellious as b'fore. I's like she's tryin' to avoid me."

"Ah, c'mon!" Fergus started. All of a sudden, a large bang of a door closing was heard through the hall. "See? Tha's probably her now."

Sure enough, there was Merida, dirty and exhausted from riding all day. She strolled in, and sat down at her place at the table. She started eating when her mother came up behind her.

They stood there in silence, a great tension building up between the two. King Fergus looked very awkward, and, not wanting to get mixed up in the mess, gestured to his sons to leave. They all quietly went out of the room, though they all agreed to leave the door slightly open to hear everything going on.

Convinced they were gone, Queen Elinor began to speak. "You're late."

"No. Ah'm not."

"Oh, you're not are you?"

"No, all ye said was t' come after noon. Well, i's after noon mum."

"You knew what I meant."

"So what if ah did?"

"Dear, I can't help but get the feelin' that you don't want t' be near me."

Merida quickly spun around in her chair, "Ah never said

that!"

"Well, if that's not it, then what is? You've been actin' very strange for months now, an' I don't know what it is."

Merida lowered her head. "Neither do I..."

"Well, ye had better find out soon, lass. You spend more time by yourself than ever. Even during our lessons I feel you just go in a trance an' ignore everythin' I say."

Merida stood up, nearly knocking over her chair. "Ah jus' need some time t' think!"

"Think about what?" her mother called, chasing after the angry princess as she stormed off to her room. After she finally caught up to her, she grabbed her daughter's hand, keeping her from disappearing in her room. "Tell me what's wrong, and I'll help you!"

Merida pulled her hand away, but she didn't close her door. She just stood there, her massive hair covering her face.

Queen Elinor looked at her daughter. Never before had she seen her so emotional. "Merida..." she started.

Merida just ignored her, and slowly closed her door.

****Storm****

Life was never the same after the death of Vahallarama, but it had changed even more after the chief's son had made peace with the dragons living near Berk. Now it seemed everyone had a dragon, and a problem to go with it.

Hiccup was given the wonderful duty of solving everyone's problems that has to do with a dragon, alongside all the other Hooligans of Berk.

The night was peaceful, but the same was not said for a certain large house at the top of a hill. Inside, a playful dragon bounded around the crossbeams, his annoyed owner trying to chase him. They crashed over beds, the fire pit and just about everything else.

Stoick sighed as he heard the noise coming up the road. He was already exhausted from the day, and he didn't feel like dealing with any more dragons. Once inside, he saw his only son pleading with his dragon as he held a viking helmet in his mouth. Seeing his father, Hiccup froze.

"Oh, hi dad."

Unfortunately, the dragon was less interested in the large man standing in the doorway, so he quickly jumped on Hiccup, toppling him over and leaped away to sit on the highest beam near the roof.

"C'mon!" Hiccup groaned. "We've already been through this!"

Stoick watched in silence as he watched his son chase his dragon all

around the house again. He knew there wasn't much he could do, but he did wish his son would take more care of one of the few memories left of his deceased wife.

After Hiccup had finally gotten his helmet, he placed it on his bed, and looked down to his father, who had put the fire pit back together, and was sticking a large fish on a stick to cook it.

"Sorry dad. I made you some dinner. Its just a certain SOMEONE" he stared at his trusty dragon, Toothless, "knocked it over."

"That's alright, Hiccup." Stoick said quietly.

Hiccup was stunned. His father was never this quiet, nor was he ever this forgiving. Normally he would yell a bit before letting his son try to explain or fix whatever was wrong. Hiccup gave him a sideways glance, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Dad, are you okay?"

Stoick gave another heavy sigh, "I'm surprised you forgot."

Hiccup tried to look as innocent as ever. "Forget what?"

The large chief stood up, letting his fish cook over the flames. He turned to his son, looking in his eyes, searching to believe if he spoke the truth. However, all Hiccup could see through Stoick's eyes was sadness and tears.

"Today's the anniversary."

Hiccup was just about to ask: _The anniversary of what?_ when he remembered. Today was the day his mother died.

"Oh." was all Hiccup could say. But inside he was screaming at himself for being so busy and not remembering.

A long silence surrounded all of them. Stoick knew he couldn't yell at his son, after all, he'd been so busy and this was the first year with the dragons living at Berk. But he still felt a bit of disappointment that he couldn't remember.

Toothless, not understanding what was going on, quietly walked up next to Hiccup and nudged his arm. Hiccup patted his head, but as he looked back at his father, the guilt returned. He didn't know what to say to him. He decided to try to make his resolve as subtle as possible.

"Hey, Toothless," he said to his green-eyed friend, "would you like to meet my mother?"

Toothless only cocked his head, but Hiccup thought it was a good enough response to jump on his back and disappear into the darkness of the night.

After they were gone, Stoick sat down, closing his eyes. "Odin help me..."

Vahallarama's grave was located at the edge of the village, perfectly

surrounded by trees so it couldn't be disturbed by dragons back when they were the enemy. It was dark and clouds began to block out the bright full moon, but Hiccup could still find the carefully placed grave, and he and Toothless managed to land only a few blocks away from the site. As the pair walked, Hiccup told the story of how his mother died, despite Toothless' lack in understanding him. Once they reached their destination, Hiccup just stood there, not saying a word. Toothless nudged him, expecting something to happen.

Hiccup simply smiled and gestured to the grave, "Toothless, meet Vahallarama the Fierce."

The dragon couldn't understand how a rock could be a viking's mother, but he slowly walked up to it, sniffed it for a moment, then licked it showing his condolences. He looked over at Hiccup, who smiled at the playful dragon. But it was at that moment the rider remembered something. Quickly, he pulled out a small booklet, filled with drawings he had done of the dragons around Berk, but this time he turned to a page he hadn't opened in a while.

The two of them stayed there for hours as Hiccup scribbled in the small leather-bound book. But as the night drew on, Toothless became restless, and the time came where he noticed something wrong. The wind began to blow harder, and more and more clouds came to cover what little light they had. He urgently nudged Hiccup, trying to get him to leave.

Oblivious to the change in climate, Hiccup shoved him back. "What is it?" But it soon became evident as a sharp wind cut through their small protection of trees, nearly knocking the skinny boy over.

Fear filling both of them, they ran away into the clearing, and Hiccup mounted the dragon, prepared for takeoff. But as they shot off into the sky, the harsh winds returned, and blew the both of them off the island. Hiccup began to panic. They tried their best to fight against mother nature, but soon it started raining as well, and instead of it being simply hard to see, it was now impossible to see for both him and the dragon. It wasn't long before lightning joined in, always followed by thunder.

Dragons were delicate creatures, and despite them having nerves of steel, never has one willingly flown off into a storm. Toothless' fear became terror, and soon, the boy couldn't control him any longer.

"C'mon, buddy. It'll be alright." He continuously tried to open Toothless' prosthetic, but as he did, the dragon closed its other fin, sending them flying into the sea.

"Toothless!" Hiccup tried to swim to the dragon, but it had been harder to maneuver in water ever since his own foot was replaced.

"Toothless!" he continued, but his calls were drowned out by the crashing waves and booming thunder.

Hiccup could only call out to his best friend one last time before he could no longer hear the roars of a scared dragon.

****Discovery****

Merida lifted her head to smell the salty sea air. She had decided to sneak out again, giving herself time to be out and alone. Though this time, she left Angus behind, letting him rest from all the times she made him run through the forest during the week.

She sighed as she trudged along the sandy shore, thinking about her argument with her mother only a few days before. She hadn't meant to be so blunt when she walked in for dinner, but...

She sighed again, and sat down to look at the open ocean. She imagined ships passing by, ships coming into the docks, ships floating away into the sky, even ships shrinking somewhere off into the distance.

Wait a momen' She thought. There WAS something off in the distance. But it wasn't a ship, it was something much smaller. The current slowly brought it closer and closer, till she saw-

"Losh*! Is tha' a boy?" She jumped up and leaned her body closer to the water and squinted her eyes to see if she was wrong.

Realizing she wasn't, she dove into the ocean, water rushing all around her. After swimming 50 yards out, she reached out and grabbed the limp body. Her arms were soon becoming numb from the cold water, but she managed to drag the skinny boy to the shore before collapsing herself. She was out of breath, but she sat up to examine her discovery.

He was a rather skinny boy with messy, brown hair. His clothes indicated he was definitely not from around there, but she she continued to examine him, she noticed a point where his left leg stopped. She gasped and nearly fell backward. His foot was missing!

She quickly recollected herself, as it was not unnatural for her to see a missing leg. Her own father lost one of his legs in a mighty battle against the legendary bear Mor'du.

She leaned in closer to the seemingly dead body, cautious as ever as though he might leap up at her at any moment. The princess sighed once it was discovered that he was breathing, even it if was very weak. He needed help, and fast. Merida quickly took off her own well-knitted cloak and wrapped it around the unconscious boy, and carefully lifted him into her arms, making sure as to not jostle him too much. She cursed under her breath for a moment for not bringing Angus with her. Fortunately, the lack in muscle on the body matched his weight, and she was able to carry him with ease.

After one final adjustment, she carried the newcomer back home.

*A Scottish exclamation

3. Chapter 3

****Care****

There was a buzz all around the castle. It was unnatural for the

princess to bring anyone to the castle, let alone a nearly drowned boy with strange clothes, let alone a boy at all. Merida had left Maudie and other maids and nurses to tend to the boy as soon as they finally got him to a spare room as she herself was still soaking wet from the swim to rescue the lad. Soon, he was dried and left to rest as his breathing slowly went back to normal.

Those who were especially excited were each named Hamish, Hubert and Harris. They always loved new visitors, conscious or not. Their poor mother and father had to fight them off the boy as Merida came in the castle.

Queen Elinor, on the other hand, had no idea what to think as she saw her own daughter carrying a skinny, weak, half-soaked boy back home. She had always hoped that one day her daughter would be carried off by a nice young man, not necessarily the other way around.

Thankfully he was accepted by King Fergus, who took special interest and almost constantly stayed by the boy's side, eager for him to wake up.

Though it wasn't until a day and a half that his eyes finally opened.

****Awaken****

There was rain all around. Everything was wet. The rain became a lake, then the ocean. Wind blew from every direction, a rhythmic beating of wings coming faster. The wings were black, scaly and attached to a beast. It got closer, and closer, then-

SCREEEEEEEEE

Hiccup awoke with a jolt, his eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling.

He sighed, _just a dream_, and sat up in his bed. But wait. Hiccup looked around. He wasn't in his usual hard, wooden bed, instead he was propped on a soft mattress, a thick, wool blanket sitting on his lap to keep him warm. His eyes searched the room, looking for something familiar. A small fireplace sat next to him, the fire died away to embers. The room was filled with furs and weapons for decoration, and a small window was at the other end of the room. Judging by the amount of light coming from it, Hiccup judged it to be close to noon.

He looked down to find he was not wearing his usual green tunic. Instead he wore a plain, blue, long-sleeved shirt, trimmed with two brass buttons. His dark green pants were also replaced by something that made the lost viking blush.

Am I wearing a skirt? he thought, seeing the thick, carefully woven material wrapped around his waist, reaching just below his knees and supported by a small, brown belt.

He placed his head in his hands. _What happened?_ Then he remembered. The storm.

"Toothless!" he cried, remembering the last time he saw his friend, the poor dragon was being swept away by the sea. With eagerness to find his dragon he stood up quickly when-

WHUMP!

Hiccup was sprawled on the floor, his shoulder banging into the side of the bed. While grabbing his shoulder, he turned to look down, only to be even more surprised.

The prosthetic Gobber made for him was gone.

****Meeting****

"Hah!" Merida shouted, swinging her blade horizontally at her father who managed to block it with his own. The two of them decided to have a little sword practice in the courtyard before Merida's princess lesson of the day.

After blocking her attack, King Fergus lunged forward, forcing Merida to leap away just before having to block her father's next move. After pushing his sword away, she came back down with a vertical strike. Seeing this, he mustered much of his energy and returned her attack by swinging his sword up, and Merida's sword was knocked out of her hand.

Merida looked to her weapon for a moment, then got a better idea. At full speed she ran toward her father and tackled him to the ground. Apparently her brothers were watching them because it wasn't too long before they were there as well, jumping all over the burly man. They rolled all over the green grass, laughing till their stomachs hurt.

Unfortunately their fun was short lived as Queen Elinor came walking up, casting a shadow over the pile. Merida groaned, slowly getting up, knowing it was time for her , Merida was to be practicing her public speaking.

"Have fun!" the King giddily called out, still wrestling with the triplets on the ground.

Both Merida and the queen rolled their eyes, walking back inside the castle.

After a while of pinning and prying three energetic, young boys, Fergus gave a long sigh, signifying he was done. The boys realized this, and ran off to find something to eat.

The exhausted king stumbled into the castle, the thumping of his wooden peg on the stone floor echoing through the castle as he entered its massive doors. He decided to check on their little "visitor" one last time for the day, and headed upstairs. Still a bit giddy from the day's small event, he hummed a traditional tune his wife always loved to sing as he swung his arms to the beat of his steps. Turning the corner, he came to the desired door, but before he was able to grasp the handle, he heard a voice from behind it yell something followed by a loud thumping noise.

Cautiously, he opened the door, only to see the confused brown-haired boy rubbing his shoulder and looking at his missing foot.

"Yer awake!" the King cried, startling Hiccup, who hadn't realized he was no longer alone.

Next thing the viking knew, he was surrounded by all different kinds of people, many of whom help him back onto the bed where he could sit up. All of them kept asking him questions, most of which consisted of his health. The boy could barely keep up, not knowing who to answer first, so he remained quiet.

"Alright everyone! Give the lad some space!" a voice called over all the others, "Ah'm sure he's exhausted an' he doesn't need the likes of ye pourin' all over him."

Hiccup sighed as everyone left the room, thankful to whomever spoke out. Though two people still remained after all the others had gone, one being a rather large man (even larger than his father), the other a slender woman with dark brown hair. She had a certain air about her that just made her the most superior person in that room, and as she approached him, Hiccup couldn't help but feel intimidated.

"Welcome," the woman said, "my name is Queen Elinor. This," she gestured to the large man, "is my husband, King Fergus."

Hiccup nodded to both of them, but still remained silent. However this didn't help much, as Queen Elinor waited for him to say something. After a good minute of silence, Elinor decided to speak up again.

"I'm sure you must be confused. You are in the land of clan DunBroch, located on the shores of Scotland. You washed up on our shores only a few days ago."

Hiccup's eyes widened at the word "Scotland." Never before had he imagined he would set foot in the land of the Scotts. Nor had he imagined he would be rescued by them and nursed back to health.

For so long, he had hated the Scotts for killing his mother but- He looked up at Queen Elinor and King Fergus. The look in their eyes gave no sign of hostility or death.

But they KILLED her! his brain screamed at him. Hiccup placed his head in his hands, resting his elbows on his legs.

The King and Queen had no idea what to do. They just stared at the boy in silence, letting him absorb all that was happening.

Hiccup's mind, on the other hand, was racing as fast as Toothless could fly. He just stared at the floor, relaying all that had happened, his mother's eyes, her hand, her heart...stopped. All gone. He closed his eyes, then looked back at the couple's faces. But what if it was a different clan? he thought. There are more clans than one in Scotland. He gave a small sigh, and his mind calmed a bit, but his heart continued to race.

It raced even faster and almost stopped when a large deer head fell in front of his face upside-down. He fell over backwards past the bed and onto the floor, hitting his head on the stones of the fireplace.

"Hamish! Hubert! Harris! Get down from there!" Queen Elinor called.

Hiccup grunted as he rubbed his head, and looked up to see three small red-head boys laughing, and clamoring off the roof of the bed. The boys gathered around their mother who scolded them as King Fergus came to help Hiccup back on the bed.

"Ah'm very sorry 'bout that." he said, "Boys will be boys."

Unfortunately that line only earned him a very cold look from his wife.

"These are our sons, Hamish, Hubert, and Harris. The three princes of DunBroch." she said.

Hiccup nodded to them as he did their parents, but as he looked at them, he could notice they were triplets. Each of them wearing long-sleeved shirts with a wrap patterned much like his own "skirt" and supported by a much too large belt. And each one wore a bright, childish smile.

"Boys," the Queen continued, "this young man is a GUEST in our home. Be nice to him, he's had a rough trip here."

The princes just giggled, and ran out of the room.

"Don't worry about them," she said to Hiccup, "they play jokes, but they mean well."

"Aye, they're probably off ta raid th' kitchen now. Speain' of which, are ye hungry?" the King questioned.

Hiccup hadn't thought of that till now. He was just about to shake his head no when his stomach gurgled very afterward, the King laughed loudly.

"Ha, well ah suppose that's a yes." and with that he left the room, coming back with a large wooden pole with a rounded chunk of wood at one end of it.

"Here," he said , handing it to Hiccup, "Ye can use this as a crutch fer now."

Hiccup took it, and stood placing it under his right armpit. He tried to take a step, but nearly fell over, making his face turn a bit red. He had never used a crutch before. Gobber had made his prosthetic while he was still unconscious after his battle with Red Death.

Fergus chuckled a bit, but he guided the boy as he slowly made his way out the door, and the two of them followed Queen Elinor through the hallway.

As he limped his way through the castle, he could see where a large opening was coming up, and he could hear a small voice echoing off the walls. He strained his neck to see what was going on, and who was speaking.

As they came to the opening, Queen Elinor shouted, "Louder! We need to hear you from every corner of the castle!"

A disgruntled girl's voice groaned, then began to sing:

"A naoidhean bhig, cluinn mo ghuth

Mise ri d' thaobh, O mhaighdean bhan
>Ar righinn oig, fas as faic
Do thir, dileas fhein"

Hiccup looked in the room to see a young girl with wild, red hair. Her bright blue eyes stood out against her pale skin, though they were only half-open, giving her an annoyed look on her face. Her back was straight, and her hands folded in front of her stomach as she continued to sing.

"A ghrian a's a ghealaich, stuir sinn

Gu uair ar cliu 's ar gloire
>Naoidhean bhig, ar righinn og
Mhaighdean uashaill bhan*"

She was done by the time they reached the bottom of the stairs that led down into the room, and when she finished, she looked to her mother for approval.

"Very good," her mother said, nodding her head.

"Ah still don' see how singin' is gonna help me with speakin'." the girl said.

"It'll sustain your voice, and help you to speak for long periods of time. And I think you're done for today, we were just about to go to the dining hall for lunch, would you care to join us? Our guest is awake now."

The red-head leaned over to look at Hiccup, giving him a sideways look.

"Ye look different now that yer out of th' water an' dry."

Hiccup had no idea how to respond. Never before had he been greeted in such a way, so he just said the first thing that came to his mind.

"I'm sure you look different wet too."

He regretted saying anything at all. His cheeks went a deep red as they all stared at him. Merida was just observing him, but the King and Queen were shocked to hear his voice for the first time. Hiccup just wished he could shrink away into nothing.

Eventually, Queen Elinor just smiled, and broke the silence.

"Ahem, might I introduce you to our daughter, Merida."

Hiccup was about to nod like he did to the other members of the family, but he wasn't quick enough, and Merida stuck out her hand, waiting to shake his. Queen Elinor just rolled her eyes. She had hoped Merida would curtsy as she had been teaching her, but there was

no helping it.

The boy took her hand slowly, "I'm Hiccup." he said.

The King and Queen were once again stunned to hear him speak, but Merida couldn't help but give a small snort. Never before had she heard such a name. She continued chuckling until her mother snapped a look at her, and Merida looked away.

"Well now," started the King, "shall we dine?"

****Lunch****

"...Mor'du has never been seen since. And is roamin' the wild, waitin' his chance of revenge!"

Hiccup clapped his hands to the story, though he was the only one. All the other family members (minus the Queen who was silently eating her food) had their heads either lying on the table, or leaning back, giving the impression of annoyance and boredom. This was only the millionth time they've heard the tale of Fergus: The Bear King. Hiccup, on the other hand, enjoyed the story, and was eager to hear more.

"So, did you ever see Mor'du again?"

"Aye, we did, but that's another tale."

"So what about ye?" Merida cut in. She was more excited to hear a story she hadn't heard before.

"Me?" Hiccup said.

"Ah'm sure ye have an interesting story t' go with yer leg."

"Merida!" her mother snapped, "You don't ask such questions!"

"Mum!"

"You never know if someone is sensitive about something like that!"

"No, no, its okay." Hiccup said, raising his hands, though he didn't know exactly how to tell his story at all. He didn't exactly feel like telling them he was a viking. There was no telling what they'd do to him.

"Uh, well, it was nothing special really. My foot just got burned really bad." he said nervously.

"Oh, really? From what?" Merida questioned.

Hiccup's eyes widened. He wasn't sure if there were dragons here, and if there weren't, well...he wasn't sure they'd believe him.

"Oh, um...well, you see, I stepped in, uh, a fire pit, and uh, my boot caught fire!"

Merida nodded, but she gave him a questionable look. His tone wasn't very convincing.

"Well, I think that's enough of that," said Queen Elinor, seeing how uncomfortable the boy was, "Merida, why don't you go show him around?"

"Mum! Do ah have to?"

"Yes. Go on, you'll have fun!"

Merida groaned, but she grabbed Hiccup's crutch, and helped him up leading him away. Queen Elinor smiled as they walked away.

Fergus looked at his wife with a raised eyebrow. When Elinor saw him, she said, "What?"

"Yer enjoyin' this."

"Well yes. Merida doesn't have any friends. This may be the opportunity of a lifetime for her to socially interact with anyone."

Fergus chuckled, "Speakin' of, have ye talked to her yet?"

"About what?"

"Why she's been so distant lately."

"Well I...I tried. But it's like she locked herself away from me. Why don't you talk to her?"

"Heh! Ye want ME to talk t' her?"

"She'd tell you anything. She won't even come near me unless I call her for a lesson now."

"Hmm, maybe you could ask her new 'friend' 'bout it!"

"Fergus!"

"Well, if ye wanted her t' be his friend. What are friend's for?"

"Fergus, I can't use the boy for personal reasons. He's been through enough."

"Ye don't know what's he's been through."

"But I know enough to know he doesn't want to talk about it. An' that's enough for me."

"Alright lass, have it yer way. But ye have to figure out what to do about Merida soon."

She sighed as he stood, and walked out of the room.

* * *

><p>*Song: Noble Maiden Fair from the movie _BRAVE_ by Emma Thompson and Peigi Barker. Translation to come later in the story.

4. Chapter 4

****Washed Up****

Stoick paced the docks. Hiccup and Toothless had been missing since the storm, and many of the dragons had been causing havoc in Berk. At first he figured Hiccup just wanted some time alone as he usually did, but because there was a storm, and Hiccup was never gone for this long, Stoick began to worry.

"I'm sure he'll be back anytime now." said Gobber, as he polished his hand prosthetic, which was now a hammer.

"I hope so..." Stoick replied, "...may Thor protect him..." he added.

He continued to look out to the horizon, the sun shining down to send lights on the water. Thornado disrupted the ocean's beauty by shooting our of the water, and landing by his rider's side. Stoick patted his enormous head, but continued looking on. The lagre, blue dragon nudged him as if asking for a fish, but Stoick merely stroked him.

Suddenly one of the boys of the village came running down to the docks, out of breath.

"Wartihog? What's going on?" Gobber asked as the eleven-year-old gasped for breath.

"I came to see Chief Stoick."

"Chief's in a trance right now, come back later."

"But they found Hiccup's dragon on the West side of the island!"

Stoick's head turned, his eyes wide. "You found Hiccup?"

"N-no. Just his dragon."

In an instant, Stoick jumped on Thornado's head and raced Westward. As they flew into a distance, Wartihog called off to them, "A bunch of men were taking him back to the village!"

By the time Stoick spotted them, they were already halfway through the forest. As they landed, he could see Toothless sprawled across the back of a Monstrous Nightmare named Hookfang, the dragon of Snotlout, a dragon trainer who worked with Hiccup.

Stoick ran over to the exhausted, black dragon, its green eyes only half-open.

"Where's Hiccup?" he asked in an almost demanding tone. But the dragon only leaned its head on Hookfang's back and fell into a deep sleep.

Stoick took a step back, realizing he would have to wait for answers. The caravan decided it was time to continue its journey, and it proceeded forward.

"Snotlout," he called to the dragon rider that was perched just behind the Monstrous Nightmare's head, "Take care of him."

"Yeah, sure." he replied as they vanished between the trees.

****The Village****

Hiccup liked the people of DunBroch. They were much more friendly and MUCH more polite than the people of Berk. Everywhere they went, someone would say, "Awrite*!" or "Afternoon!"

Merida, however, was not having as grand of a time. She always had to wait for Hiccup to limp his way through the village. Earlier she had introduced him to Angus, but he didn't like the idea of riding anything besides Toothless, especially when he wasn't wearing any pants. And to his surprise, none of the men there wore pants or any sort of leggings. When he asked Merida about it, she just laughed at him.

"Hah! Only the women here wear leggin's!"

They continued to walk through the busy streets, markets trying to sell their afternoon products, the sun beating down on everyone. Though no one minded because of the cool breeze sweeping in from the ocean.

Eventually they came to an environment that was familiar to Hiccup.

"Hiccup, this is Ailean**, the finest blacksmith of the kingdom!" introduced Merida, "He makes all the weapons fer th' castle. Ailean, this is Hiccup, the boy floatin' in th' ocean."

"How are ye?" he said. Ailean was a rather large man with arms the size of Hiccup's entire body. He too wore a traditional patterned kilt with a brown belt and large, black boots. Unlike the others, however, he was shirtless and covered in soot from the fireplace.

"Uh, hi." said Hiccup.

The man eyed Hiccup, but he kept a smile on his face. Then he turned to Merida, "How's that new bow workin' fer ye?"

Merida shrugged her shoulders. "Alright ah suppose. Still not the same as mah old one."

"Well, not much ah can do 'bout that. Which weapon is yer specialty?" he said to Hiccup.

Hiccup raised his hands. "Oh, I don't really fight."

"Ye don't? Then what do ye do?"

"Well..." Hiccup looked around the shop, eyeing all the materials and

weapons, "I'm more of a blacksmith myself."

Ailean raised an eyebrow. "Oh, ye are, are ye?" he said looking at Hiccup's stature. Then he gave a smirk and took a step back. "Alrighty then. How 'bout a little test then? Why don't ye make somethin' here?"

Hiccup was a bit taken aback. Sure, Gobber trusted him to use whatever when he was alone in the shop, but this was someone he had just barely met and he would permit him to use all his equipment.

"Well, what would I make?" he asked.

Ailean eyed around the shop, looking for a good weapon to test his knowledge.

"How 'bout ye make yerself a new leg?" Merida chipped in.

Both Hiccup and Ailean looked at Hiccup's stub at the end of his leg. Ailean smiled to show his approval, though Hiccup was a bit disappointed. He wanted to show his strengths as a blacksmith, though he had never made a prosthetic for himself. He had always made one for Toothless, but Gobber made his one and only. Though, judging by the looks on Merida's and Ailean's faces, he really didn't have a choice in the matter.

Merida watched closely as Hiccup drew out a plan and began measuring his height, the length of the prosthetic and so on. She had always enjoyed coming to watch Ailean work before since she was little, so she was a bit too excited to see someone else working.

It was a bit hard for Hiccup to work with a different environment than what he was used to, especially when he had to hop around or use a crutch. At times, Ailean would help in showing him where certain equipment was, but other than that, he stayed out of the way. As Hiccup worked, Ailean and Merida looked at his plans, a bit worried for the turnout. This was certainly a prosthetic like they had never seen before.

It was hours before Hiccup was done. When he finished, it looked only a bit like Gobber's, but Hiccup adjusted it so he would be able to stand and run better by having a flatter bottom.

"Ta-da!" He exclaimed, holding up his creation.

Merida clapped, still a bit excited from the whole process. Though Ailean was confused on the design.

"Why'd ye make it like that?"

Hiccup looked down at his new leg. "Well, I guess it just reminds me a bit of home." His eyes went distant as he remembered all his family and friends...and Toothless.

Ailean saw the look in his eyes, and didn't want to pry any more. "Alright, put it on, let's see!"

After struggling a bit, Hiccup managed to position his foot to stay on his leg. That was one of the few things it had in common with

Gobber's version; it could come off easily.

"Right, now," said Merida, taking the crutch away and putting it outside the shop. "Let's see ye walk with it."

It wasn't that difficult for Hiccup. He had been using his old prosthetic for a while, so it only took a little getting used to with the new design.

Merida clapped her hands together as she did before, a bright smile shining on her face. Hiccup could help but smile back at her. As he continued to walk on his own, Merida couldn't help but feel a sense of pride for him. He was like a little puppy just learning to walk and bark.

"Yer amazin', Hiccup!" she exclaimed as she walked over and bent over to get a closer look at his invention. "What else can ye do?"

Hiccup shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever, I suppose."

She smiled, though this time with a devilish look in her eyes. "Alright then, how 'bout a request? I'd be willin' ta pay ye for it."

"Well..." said Hiccup, placing a hand on his neck, "I don't really have a place to work."

"Ailean will let ye work here. Won't ye Ailean?"

The blacksmith just shrugged his shoulders while smiling, and turned back to his work he was doing before the pair came to visit him.

Hiccup sighed, "OK, fine. What do you want me to do?"

Merida's face beamed, and in an instant, she grabbed his hand and bolted out the door back up the path they already walked. Hiccup nearly tripped, as the prosthetic he was using was brand-new. The princess dragged all the way back to the castle and into a room much like the one Hiccup woke up in. Inside was a bed and a fireplace with a fur pelt in between the two. The small desk sat by the window, covered in papers and a beautifully carved chess set. And all around were massive amounts of carvings that resembled bears. Merida dashed for a small chest at the end of the bed and started rummaging through it.

"Who's room is this?" Hiccup asked, looking at all the carvings.

"Mine." said Merida, still digging through the chest.

"Why do you have so many bear carvings?"

"It's a long story. Ah! Here it is!" and she pulled out a small, wrinkled piece of paper.

Hiccup noticed a small drawing on it, yet again with bears, though it had a very abstract design.

"Do ya think ye could make a necklace with this on it?" Merida

asked.

Hiccup looked at her. She had a very hopeful look in her eyes, as if this was the only thing that mattered in the world.

"I...suppose I can." he replied.

Merida's face beamed up as it did back in the blacksmith's shop. "Thank ya very much Hiccup! Ailean can make a sword in a jiffy, but he never had such precision that you have."

"May I just ask, what is this for?"

The brightness in her eyes died down. "Well, its fer me mum. She used ta have one a long time ago, but when she gave it to me, ah...lost it."

"You lost it?"

"Aye, I did."

He wasn't very convinced with Merida's tone deceiving her, but he shrugged it off.

Hiccup looked back at the drawing. "Well, I've never made a necklace before, but I'll be sure to give this a shot."

The bright smile returned to Merida's face, though it disappeared again when her mother strolled in.

"Oh, hello dear." said Queen Elinor to Merida, who thought the floor was more interesting than her mother's eyes.

"Afternoon, your Majesty." said Hiccup, trying to break the tension between the family members.

"Evening is more like it now," started the Queen, "In fact, it's time for dinner, which is the reason I came to get you two."

"Alright, mum. We're coming." Merida said, still not looking at her mother's face.

The Queen hesitated for a moment, then nodded to Hiccup and left. Hiccup looked at Merida with a questionable look, his eyebrows furrowing slightly.

"Are you angry with your mom?"

"What? No, Ah'm not. Why do ye say that?"

Hiccup shrugged, not wanting to get in an argument. He had a feeling he'd lose anyway.

"Well, shall we go then?" Hiccup said, gesturing to the open door.

Merida nodded, and the two of them went downstairs.

****Plan****

Stoick paced the Great Hall with quick strides as he did when waiting at the docks. Toothless had awoken and was better, but there was no way for a dragon to tell him where Hiccup was, if he even knew at all. The black dragon only looked out to the sea as the chief had done before, calling out to his partner. Occasionally he would sniff around trying to catch a scent on the wind, but it was no use.

"You wanted to see me?" asked Gobber, walking into the Great Hall after pushing the gigantic doors aside.

"Gobber! Yes, I need your help."

"With what?"

"I need ideas on how to find Hiccup. No matter what I think of, there's always something in the way."

"Why not just organize a search party? We could sail out for a few days, come back, sail again--"

"No, that would take too long, and the men would get restless after one trip."

"Then we'll take Toothless with us. He found the Dragons' Nest for us before."

"But he knew where it was before."

"He might know where Hiccup is."

"No," said a small female voice. "He hasn't got a clue."

Astrid walked in, leaning on the edge of the giant fire pit in the middle of the room.

"That dragon never stays at the same shore. He's constantly moving from coast to coast, trying to listen for Hiccup. If we're trying to get to him as soon as possible, taking the dragon might be slower than just taking a search party."

"What do you suggest?" asked Stoick, looking earnestly at the blonde.

"Let Toothless find him."

The chief and the blacksmith looked at each other, confused.

"But you just said we shouldn't take him!" piped Gobber.

"I know," said Astrid, "but I said we should let Toothless find him. Alone."

"Astrid, you of all people should know that Toothless can't fly on his own, and he won't let anyone besides Hiccup sit on his back."

"Hiccup made a tail that he could operate on his own last winter."

"Right, but the bloody dragon smashed it!"

"But the designs for it could still be in Hiccup's work-space. You could make a new tail for him and he could find Hiccup the same way he found his helmet!"

"Alright," said Stoick, "say he makes a new tail for him, and the dragon goes off, how will we know he'll be coming back with Hiccup?"

The female viking stood there for a moment, her eyes narrowing.

"Well," she continued, "Toothless won't stop looking till he finds him, and if he does, Hiccup will ride him back home."

"But what if there's trouble where Hiccup's at?" Gobber interrupted.

"Then Toothless will help him out, or Hiccup might send him back to get help from us."

Gobber looked over at Stoick, an eyebrow raised as the chief ran over the entire conversation in his mind again. After a few long moments, he turned back to Gobber.

"Find those designs and get that tail ready as soon as possible, and tell me when you're done."

Gobber nodded, and started off for his small store. Once he was gone, Stoick walked over and placed his large hand on Astrid's shoulder.

"Let's hope this works." he said.

"Yeah..." she replied quietly, then looked out to the open doorway. The sun had gone down and the lights outside flickered from the wind.

Hiccup... she whispered.

* * *

><p>*A scottish greeting with the English equivalent of "Hi!"<p>

**A Gaelic name meaning "rock" or "noble"

5. Chapter 5

Long Nights

Nights in Scotland were much different than the nights on Berk. Instead of the low rumbling of a dragon's snore, all Hiccup could hear was the rhythmic footsteps of the guards on patrol outside. Hiccup lay awake, listening to all the sounds, every one of them reminding him of his best friend. He sat up straight when he heard an flapping noise just beyond his window, but when he opened it, there was only a small crow that managed to fly right by Hiccup's face, causing him to wave him arms and yell at the bird before it flew back out his window. Sighing, he walked back to his bed and tried once

again to go to sleep.

Merida didn't get much sleep that night either. Then again, she hadn't been for the past several months. Every night she thought about her mother, her position, and her fate. Many times she would sit up, grab her bow, and from her bed she would aim out her window toward a tower across the courtyard that had a target she had put there. She closed her eyes for a moment, concentrating on only the target, everything clear from her mind, the target suddenly becoming the only thing left in the world, then she would open her eyes just once more, and-

SMACK!

As usual, the arrow flew straight into the center of the target, possibly slitting yet another arrow sent there a few nights before. But though she had hit her millionth bull's eye, as soon as the arrow was gone out of her room, all the pressures and worries entered her mind once again. Before lying back down to sleep, Merida placed her bow on the desk, stirred the dying embers, and curled up on her animal skin rug, her eyes only closing ever so slowly.

****Shorelines****

"What do ya mean ye've never had a Dundee cake?" Merida exclaimed.

The next morning Queen Elinor sent Merida to show Hiccup around the kingdom again, but this time she took him to the docks and shores by the ocean. They had been hiking over rocks and weeds for an hour before Hiccup declared exhaustion, and the two sat down, feeling the cool breeze refresh them.

"Well, it's not exactly your everyday cuisine where I come from." Hiccup said in an almost annoyed tone.

"Help ma boab*! Ye need ta try it. Ah always ask fer that fer mah birthday, with almonds and apple fruit peel." she gave a long sigh, remembering the taste of her favorite dessert. Opening her eyes, she turned her thoughts back to her tourist. "So what about ye? What's yer favorite food?"

"Well, out of the many, WONDERFUL things I've eaten in my life, I'd have to say salmon."

"Salmon?" Merida cocked her head in disbelief.

"Or Icelandic cod."

"Iceland? Are ye from the North?" asked Merida, remembering her many geography lessons from her mother.

Hiccup suddenly got very nervous. "Uh, yeah. Not too far, just far enough. Of course, it's colder, but not much colder than here, here's pretty cold too, but it's warmer here than back home..."

Merida just laughed as Hiccup continued to ramble on. Eventually he ran out of steam and just mumbled his last words.

"Yer a strange boy." Merida stated after she was done laughing.

"Thanks, I really appreciate it." he said sarcastically.

"No, no. Ah meant it as a compliment. Ye see, ah was always considered ta be strange too. So everythin' normal, everythin' my mum accepts is strange to me. Does tha' make sense to ye?"

"Actually, yes." The princess looked over to him, curiosity filling her eyes as he continued, "My dad is like that. He always expected me to be something I wasn't, and when I finally became his perfect son, everything went wrong. He thought I was one thing, then I became the disappointment of his life."

Merida listened intently, at the same time connecting back to her mother, the clans, the marriage, and the bear. She shivered, remembering Mor'du's face, and the face of a mother hidden by a beast.

"What happened next?" she asked, hoping for a resolve to her own problem.

"Well, he realized I couldn't be the son he expected, but I managed to become the son he could be proud of." Hiccup smiled, remembering the time at the Dragons' Nest when his father said for the first time that he was proud of him.

"What's yer father like? Is he a great man?" Merida was becoming more and more interested about this boy's relationship with his father.

"Great is an understatement. He strength is known all through the land, and as a chief, he could inspire an army just by showing his face. Absolutely nothing like me."

"Chief? Yer da's a chief?" Merida was surprised. Hiccup didn't seem like a son of a great leader, then again neither did the sons of clans Macintosh, Dingwall and MacGuffin.

Hiccup's eyes bulged. He had let another thing slip as he rambled. "Uh, yes, though our village is pretty small. You probably wouldn't know him."

"No, probably not. Ah don't know much of anything outside the kingdom. Mah mum gives lessons, but mostly of only surrounding islands and the land of the clans."

"Wait, have you ever been outside the kingdom?"

"Yes, through the forest. I stumbled upon an ancient castle of legend, but I've never been at sea. Mah mum thinks it's too dangerous."

"REALLY?" Hiccup couldn't count the amount of times he went on a ship, or even just rode out to sea on Toothless. Of course, he couldn't deny it WAS dangerous. Storms and pirates could catch you at any time, and being shipwrecked never helped either.

Merida simply nodded to his question, then looked out to the open

ocean in front of her. Avoiding her temptation, she stood up, gesturing for Hiccup to follow.

"Let's go, it's gettin' late." she said.

Sendoff

Astrid stroked Stormfly's quills down, waiting for Gobber to come with the new tail he had finished just the night before. She looked over to Toothless, who was looking out to the ocean once again. She could have sworn he almost jumped off a cliff trying to fly just a few days before. He missed Hiccup too much, and it was starting to wear him down. The poor dragon only slept when he couldn't stay awake any longer, and the fish Astrid tried feeding to him remained sitting by him.

It was decided the night before that Astrid would follow Toothless on Stormfly to ensure the safety of Toothless and Hiccup.

"Hey! Here I am!" Gobber called, followed by Stoick, cradling a tail fin made from a long-forgotten blueprint.

Astrid turned to see him bundling down the path, eventually coming to a stop right in front of Astrid and her own blue dragon.

Handing her the fin, Gobber said, "Ye better hurry along now."

"How much food did you pack?" asked Stoick.

"Just about enough for a month." she said taking the fin. Carefully, she approached Toothless from behind, hoping he wouldn't notice as she put it on him. Unfortunately, the dragon did notice and leaped away, growling.

"Hey, hey." said Astrid, putting the tail down and lifting her hands. "We made this to find Hiccup. Do you want to find him?"

Toothless' ears perked at "Hiccup," and after a few moments, he crept back toward Astrid, positioning his tail near the slightly familiar tail fin.

"Good boy." said Astrid, and she fastened the prosthetic to Toothless' tail, securing everything as to make sure it would work once he tried it.

Once she was done, the dragon lifted his tail, examining the fin as he did once before, realizing he could fly on his own again. As soon as this realization came, he spread his wings and shot off into the air, bolting to look for a scent of Hiccup. Nearly blown off the dock by the sudden take-off, Astrid collected herself before climbing atop Stormfly and racing as fast as the dragon could go after the Night Fury.

"We'll be back soon!" she called behind her, trying to reassure the teary-eyed father. But she was already beyond their ear-shot by the time she yelled it.

"May the Aesir** and Eir*** protect them all." prayed Stoick, tears filling his eyes once again.

****Sewing****

A week had now passed since Hiccup's first day of consciousness, and Merida was stuck in her mother's sewing room, trying to untangle five different threads she was using for embroidery. Meanwhile her mother sat silently working on her new tapestry project that hung on the wall. It appeared to be the trinity sign with knotted designs weaving in and out of it. Frustrated and sick of sewing, Merida threw down her cloth.

"Mum, ah can't do it!" she complained, standing up.

"Sure you can, Merida. It just takes some time." her mother replied as she watched her daughter storm out of the room, bow in hand.

Elinor sighed. She knew Merida was free-spirited and wild, but sometimes she wished her daughter would listen to her for even just a little time. _Maybe she just doesn't love you..._ she thought to herself, as a small, silent tear rolling down her cheek. For a moment, she let it fall, but she never displayed weakness, even alone by herself. Quickly she blinked it away and continued working.

Elsewhere, Merida trudged out of the castle and down the path, knowing where her new friend would be. Hiccup was working on Merida's request, though he stopped a few times to help out Ailean, who was being overworked that day. By now, Hiccup had gotten his old clothes back, which had to be washed multiple times to get the algae and everything else out of the fabric. Relieved, he had put his pants back on, even if it meant being weird in the land of the Celts, though he had to admit, the clothes they had given him were very comfortable, and he enjoyed wearing them. So a blue shirt hung on a board by the ceiling of the workshop, and the kilt was still wrapped around his waist.

"Hey, Hiccup!" called Ailean from the back of the shop, "could ye help me with somethin' lad?"

Sweaty and tired, the viking stood up, stretched his back, then walked to where Ailean was.

"What is it?"

"Ah need ye ta deliver somethin' fer me. Mr. Boag needs his halberd now, but ah hafta maintain th' heat on the furnace."

Hiccup groaned quietly. He didn't know the village all too well, and he went to the wrong home many times on delivery. But Ailean seemed like the kind of person you didn't want to say "no" to.

"Sure, where is it?" sighed Hiccup, grabbing his shirt off the roof beam.

"Over by th' clamp. He lives close to th' docks. He'll have his name on th' door."

"Right," replied Hiccup, putting his shirt on and grabbing the weapon, "what's his name again?"

"BOAG. Now get goin'."

Hiccup stumbled out the door, halberd in his arms. Half groaning, half whining, he started down the road, dodging other people going down the road and nearly getting run over by an ox. Eventually, he made it to his destination and dropped off the weapon, giving him time to get lost on his way back...again. Hiccup decided this time he would just keep walking till he found something familiar, kicking a pebble with his right foot to pass the time, and to distract his as he thought about Toothless again.

Finally, he had made it back, and he sat down in his stool to start working on his commission again. Though he was yet again interrupted when a flash of red hair flew by his face, stomping through the door and grumbling something that Hiccup couldn't make out. Merida paced the shop a bit, catching the attention of both blacksmiths before starting her rant:

"Ah don't know how she expects me ta learn how ta sew! Ah don't like sewing! And it's obvious ah don't have the patience fer it. Ah just don't understand why she keeps doin' this. Ah have been sewin' pretty much since the day ah was born! Ah'm never going ta get it! And every time all she says is, 'make yer stiches smaller, don't bunch up the thread, don't bunch up the cloth, ye skipped a stitch!' Jus' because you like sewin' don't mean ah do!"

Hiccup didn't have to ask who this was about. It seemed every time Merida was angry it was directed toward her mother. So, he just sat there, swinging his legs as she continued to rage. Only when she was done did Hiccup dare to speak.

"Have you ever SERIOUSLY took the time to TRY to enjoy sewing?" he asked, Merida now sitting down and examining a broad-sword.

"No, but ah know ah wouldn't enjoy it."

"How come? I'd imagine someone like you who has such great precision in archery would be amazing at sewing!"

"Because sewing is not archery. Archery involves strength and precision. Sewing is just...just...well, girly!"

"And you're a girl."

Merida glared at him, giving him the you-know-what-I-meant look.

"Look, I'm just saying!" said Hiccup, raising his hands, "Why don't you talk to HER about it instead? Y'know? Work something out?"

"Because I don't want the same thing ta happen again!"

"WHAT to happen?"

Merida went silent. She turned away, hanging the sword she had in her hand back on the wall. Though Hiccup was utterly confused. He looked over to Ailean for help, who was watching them from the back, but quickly looked away and began working again when he noticed Hiccup's stare. As Hiccup looked back at Merida he could see the rage had left

her face, but it was replaced by something he couldn't even describe. She looked off into space, as if in turmoil within herself.

Swallowing hard, Merida looked back at Hiccup, then said, "Ah'm sorry for distracting ye from yer work. Please forgive me." and she left.

Hiccup watched her as she went out the door, her curly hair bouncing as she strode back up the steps to the castle. Curiosity filled his mind and he went to the back of the shop as soon as she was gone.

"Hey, Ailean. Did something happen between Merida and the Queen before?"

Ailean's eyes bulged, and he stopped adding coals to the fire. "Aye," he said slowly, "it happened a year ago. Though us villagers don't talk about it much. It's...difficult...ta understand." Nervously, he began adding more coals. "Ye better ask th' princess about it instead. Ah shouldn't be th' one ta tell ya."

Hiccup sighed. It was obvious Merida didn't want to talk about it, and Merida didn't seem like the kind of person whose bad side you want to get on.

"Though," Ailean added, "ye could always ask th' Queen herself about it. Ah'm not sure if she'd be as avoiding as th' princess, but it's worth a shot."

This didn't help at all. Hiccup was always intimidated by the Queen. Asking her about a personal problem would be out of the question. Though, he truly wanted to know what was going on...

****Later that night****

Hiccup plopped back onto his bed, exhausted from the work Ailean gave him. Lazily, he kicked his one boot off, letting it fall to the floor. Slowly, he turned over on his stomach, thinking about what happened in the shop with Merida. Her face was so sullen, as if she was in pain.

Then, out of the blue, Merida walked in, though Hiccup hadn't noticed, and continued to stare off into space. Quietly, she closed the door, her face slightly lowered and hidden away by her hair.

"Ah'm sorry about today, Hiccup." she said quietly, her head still lowered.

Hearing her, the boy shot up, his green eyes wide from shock.

Though Merida just continued, "Ah'm sorry fer bein' so mad. Ah hope ye know it wasn't directed toward you, an' ah'm sorry ye had to listen to all that. Ah'm sure ye have other things ta worry about."

"No, no" said Hiccup, "It's fine. You don't have to apologize. I can tell things are difficult with your mom."

Merida's face sank even lower. "It's all my fault, really." she said, "Ah've been selfish, an' she deserves more from me."

Hiccup slapped himself on the forehead. Obviously, it was NOT the right thing to say.

"And you deserve more too." the princess continued. Hiccup looked at her, an eyebrow raised. "Yer the only one that doesn't know about the situation between mah mum an' I. To be honest, ah was embarrassed when ah found out th' entire village found out. But in a small kingdom, there's no stoppin' it. But ye have just as much right ta know as everyone else, and if ye want ta know, meet me in th' courtyard at dawn."

By now her face had emerged from her mass of curls, and Hiccup could see tear stains drawn all over her face. He just nodded, and allowed her to collect herself before she left.

In all honesty, Hiccup was stunned. He had only been in the household of DunBroch for a week, but never before had he seen Merida this way. She had always seemed so headstrong, so determined, and so uncontrollable. He never thought he'd see the day when she spilled tears. Laying back down, he closed his eyes, hoping to drift into a sleep before having to wake at dawn the next day.

In his mind, he pictured Merida's face, her tearful blue eyes closed. He wanted her to open them. He didn't want her to cry any more. Slowly, she opened her eyes again, but they weren't her eyes. They were a yellow-green, with deep black slits. Hiccup could see his reflection in them, just like the time when a Night Fury held him against a rock just after he had released it. It opened its mouth to let out a roar, but it wasn't a roar. Hiccup could see his dragon wailing and flapping its wings as it fell into the ocean. Down, down into the depths of the sea.

"TOOTHLESS!" Hiccup cried.

Again, he had fallen off the bed in his sleep, his blanket wrapped tightly around his prosthetic, the image of Toothless' face slowly melting away as he came back to reality. Huffing, he untied the blanket from his leg, crawled back into bed and curled up, hugging his pillow tightly, trying not to think of his friend.

Elsewhere, a black dragon's ears perked up, and he lifted his head toward where he thought he heard Hiccup's voice. He whined into the wind and sniffed the air, trying to hear it again.

"There, there." said Astrid, stroking his neck. Despite his many protests, she managed to get the dragon to land on a small island to rest before they continued their journey again. At first it was just non-stop flying, but after the third day, she insisted he stopped for the health of Stormfly, who was curled up by Astrid, purring loudly. Ever since their first stop, it gradually became easier to get Toothless to stop for just one night, but if she didn't wake up fast enough, he would leave both of them behind.

Slowly, Toothless put his head back down and closed his eyes, making a low rumbling noise in his throat.

"Don't worry," Astrid tried to comfort him the best she could. "We'll

find him soon...I hope..."

****Legend of the Bear Princess****

Merida never woke up early on her own, but this time she'd have to, as she promised. Groggily, she sat up a bit before dawn, and slipped out of bed, trying to pull her nightgown off. After she had changed into her favorite blue dress, she strapped her belt and quiver to her waist, secured her bow over her shoulder, and stumbled out the door. Quietly, she lipped past her parent's room, then made her way down to the kitchen, where she snagged a couple apples lying on the table and popped one in her mouth. Casually, she walked out the back door, only to trip on the steps over something large, skinny, and half-awake. Merida braced herself as she came in contact with the hard stones on the ground, meanwhile Hiccup was groaning to a rude awakening.

"Are ye tryin' ta kill me?" Merida exclaimed, realizing who it was.

"Sorry..." Hiccup mumbled, rubbing the spot where her foot came in contact with his back.

Merida rolled her eyes, then tossed one of her apples to the viking. Then she stood and walked over to the stable where her own pet was waiting for her.

"Mornin' Angus!" she said, handing her last apple to him. The Clydesdale accepted it graciously, neighing with approval.

Hiccup picked up the apple and took a bite out of it. Then he remembered why on earth he was outside.

"So, you're gonna tell me about the...thing...with you...and your mom...right?"

"Aye," Merida replied, grabbing a saddle and positioning it on Angus' back.

"And...you're getting your horse ready. That's...nice."

"I'll tell ye part of th' tale on the way there. Of course, it'll take too long on foot, and ah haven't rode Angus in a while. He needs the exercise."

"Wait, on the way where?" Hiccup asked, starting to be even more confused than he was before.

"You'll see soon enough." Merida replied as she fastened the harness on the horse's head. After she was done, she grabbed a handful of oats and fed it to Angus just before climbing onto his back and walking her steed over to Hiccup. "Well? Are ye comin'?"

Hiccup looked at the horse, who seemed harmless enough, but he had never ridden a horse before.

"Listen, I already told you. I don't feel comfortable riding horses."

"Ye have yer pants back."

"Well, that's not the only problem. I have my own...animal I ride back home."

"Ah'm sure he'll forgive ye. C'mon, or ah'm gonna leave ye."

Hiccup hesitated for a moment, wary of Angus' every movement. Slowly, he approached the beast, and in a single moment he grabbed Merida's extended arm and swung over the horse's back. Though Merida decided it'd be fun to give the boy a little scare, so as soon as she knew he was in contact with the horse, she yelled and snapped the reins. Angus darted forward, nearly making Hiccup fall off, but he quickly grabbed around Merida's waist, terror filling his face as well as a bunch of red hair. Laughing, Merida gradually had Angus slow down, allowing the lad to calm down before she started her story.

"That wasn't funny." said Hiccup, releasing Merida from his tight grip when they finally started walking again.

"Oh, it's just all good fun!" the girl smiled as she looked back to her passenger.

"So where are we going?" said Hiccup, looking around at the mass of trees surrounding them.

"To a place where ah tried to change mah fate." Merida said.

Hiccup leaned his body sideways to see her eyes, but it was no use. Her hair was covering her face again.

"Mah life before was similar to now. Ah had to take lessons from mah mum about bein' a princess. Ah had ta learn how to walk, talk, eat, everythin'. An' one day, she told me ah was supposed t' be married off to some suitor. T' one of the sons of the three lords. Ah got scared. Ah...ah just wasn't ready yet! But she wouldn't listen, an' ah had to take matters into mah own hands. Ye see, here we have laws, that any suitor that wishes th' hand of th' princess must first prove his worth in a game chosen by th' princess herself. So...ah chose archery, an' once th' lads had shot their arrows, ah took mah stand an' showed 'em up. Unfortunately, mah mum still didn't understand, and she became furious, an' that's where out troubles started. She an' I had a...talk...an' ah still couldn't believe she wanted me t' go through with this, so ah tore her tapestry t' show ah couldn't be like her, but ah wasn't prepared for what happened next. She took mah bow an' threw it into th' fire. Ah was so hurt. Mah dad had given it t' me fer mah birthday when ah turned six. So, when ah realized it was gone forever...ah ran. Ah kept runnin' till ah ended up...here."

Hiccup looked up to see them standing in a ring of tall boulders, all standing vertically except for one that was broken at the base and appears to have fallen.

"What is this place?" he said, his eyes scanning every inch of the area. Mysterious as it was, he had to admit, it was beautiful.

"Ah don't know." Merida replied, shrugging her shoulders. "But once ah got here, I was guided by th' Will' O' the Wisps to another place."

"Will' O' the Wisps? What are those?"

"Spirits of old who lead people t' their fate. Good or bad."

"Where did they lead you?"

"To a witch. A witch of whom I used mah mum's necklace, th' same necklace ah asked ye to make a replica of, t' pay fer a spell. A spell of which ah had hoped would change mah fate."

"Did it?"

Merida's head lowered again, and she tapped Angus with her leg to make him go forward again. "Aye...but not th' way ah had hoped." She took in a deep breath, then continued. "It had turned her into a bear. A large, black bear. Thankfully, she was still her on th' inside, but not for long. After we had escaped th' castle, we found the home of th' witch again t' try t' change her back, but all we found out was after the second sunrise, she would be a wild bear...forever..."

Hiccup remained silent, listening to her, but he couldn't help but pop the question, "Did she?"

"O' course not! She's still here!" Merida exclaimed, and Hiccup slapped himself again, embarrassed for forgetting the Queen was back at the castle.

"But it wasn't easy." she said, "Th' witch gave me a hint for how t' change her back, though it was hard to figure out. She said, 'Fate be changed, look inside, mend the bond, torn by pride.' We had no idea what to do. After the first sunrise, the Will' O' the Wisps led us to an old abandoned castle where we discovered the last one to use the same spell was none other than the beast of terror himself, Mor'du."

Hiccup's eyes widened. From the way King Fergus described the beast, he'd never imagine it used to be a human.

"Mor'du used to be a prince from an ancient kingdom who had three other brothers. When their father died, he split the kingdom into four instead of giving him his birthright, so he asked the witch to change his fate, and he transformed into Mor'du. And after only barely escaping his claws at his old castle, we thought the answer to th' spell was the tapestry ah tore before changin' mah mum. Ah thought that all ah had to do was stitch it up and she would be fine. Unfortunately mah dad found us before ah could even start, an' once he saw mum, he attacked her. Thankfully she escaped, and went back to that clearing ah took ye to, an' thanks to th' help of me brothers, ah finished th' tapestry an' got back to protect mum from mah dad. But just before ah could explain t' mah dad, Mor'du appeared, an' nearly killed us all if not fer me mum. She fought him and crushed him under that fallen rock ye saw. Though, the second sunrise was coming, an' we were runnin' out of time. So ah grabbed th' tapestry an' threw it over mah mum, though it didn't work...ah didn't know what to do. Mah mum was becomin' wild before mah eyes, an all ah could do was say ah was sorry. Sorry for everythin'. An' ah gave her mah last words sayin' ah loved her...ah...just couldn't believe she was gone, an' she wasn't. She changed back, an th' marriage conflict was resolved. Ah couldn't have been happier." she smiled, looking ahead of her.

"An' we gave promises t' each other after that day. She'd give me mah freedom, an' ah'd continue t' prepare fer bein' a proper princess. But as time went on, ah realized ah couldn't meet her expectations with everythin', and again, ah got scared. Ah don't hate mah mum, Hiccup, but ah do hate myself. Ah avoid mah mum now because ah can't bear to disappoint her even more. Ah pretend to be annoyed with th' lessons an' occasionally, ah truly am annoyed with them, but ah try t' show her ah can't do it. But ah can't talk to her about it. Ah'm afraid ah'll make another mistake and turn her into..." she trailed off.

"A bear?"

Merida hid her face again, and Hiccup could hear a few soft sniffs.

"Hey, sometimes it's okay to be scared. But that doesn't mean you have to hate yourself." Hiccup reassured, "You're strong, you're brave, and you're a princess. Based on what you told me, I think your mom will listen to you. Just talk to her. You said so yourself you only pretend to be annoyed with some of the lessons, so why not talk about which ones you prefer with her, try to work something out?"

"Ah can't!"

"Sure you can! Merida..." she looked back at him. "Just try..."

She nodded, but her eyes told him she wasn't going to. Hiccup sighed, and the two of them remained silent for the rest of their journey.

* * *

><p>*A Scottish exclamation of astonishment or exasperation<p>

**A group of warrior gods led by Odin who inhabit Asgard (Norse Mythology)

***Goddess of healing (Norse Mythology)

6. Chapter 6

Tears

The hot evening winds blew fiercely, causing the horses in the stables to stir. Merida and Hiccup had returned long before, the blacksmith now rolling in his sleep in his quarters. The princess, however, was pacing her room in her nightgown, thinking about the day's event. Wondering whether or not to talk to the Queen.

Queen Elinor, on the other hand, was yet again working on her tapestry, adding more colors to the woven trinity sign. She always sewed whenever she was angry or stressed, and it was always where King Fergus could find her.

"Mind if ah come in?" he asked, poking his head out from behind the door.

"Do as you please." said Elinor, waving her hand, "that's just what everyone else in this house does."

Fergus sighed, walking in, leaving the door open behind him before approaching his wife. She continued to stitch as he placed his large hands on her shoulders, kissing the top of her head.

"Ye alright, lass?" he said, turning her body to prevent her from ignoring him.

"Fine, fine." she said, trying to turn back to continue working.

He let her go and sat back in a small stool sitting by the Queen's personal sewing chest.

"No, yer not." he said folding his arms. "Yer upset, an' ah'm guessing it's about our wee princess."

She sighed, letting her needle fall and hang from the thick thread, still attached to the large tapestry.

"She got upset at me again, but ah don't know what to do about it. I can't yell at her, she'll just yell back, and last time we had a heated argument THAT happened." she sighed again, her brown eyes turning to her husband, who was attempting at a comforting smile.

"Have ye talked to her?"

"I tried! But she always runs off as if I'm going to bite her head off!"

The King nodded, remembering all the times he saw Merida run away from her mother during a lesson, during a meal, or even during a court meeting.

"Well, have ye talked to HIM yet?"

"Who?"

"Hiccup! Ah see they've gotten closer since ye've been sendin' her off with him every day."

"Fergus! I told you, I won't use that poor boy for personal matters!" Elinor snapped, and she turned back to her sewing.

The King stood up, grunting a bit as he put weight back on his wooden peg. "Fine," he said, "we've already been through this before, but Ah'm tellin' ye, if ye don't sort this out now, ye never will." and he gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

"There's nothing to sort out. It's official. Merida hates me, and there's nothing I can do about it."

"She doesn't hate ye, lass!"

"Yes, she does!" her voice cracked, but she swallowed hard before continuing. "I never even see her smile anymore..." she looked off to a distance, trying to remember something long past, "...people keep telling me she has a beautiful smile. Why can't I see it?"

Fergus went silent. He couldn't argue with her. Merida's face always darkened whenever the Queen walked in, turning her attention to her shoes, or just completely turning her back.

"I used to see her smile." Elinor said, pulling a stitch. "What did I do to make her stop?"

The Queen couldn't take it any longer. She dropped her needle and again and began to sob. Dozens of tears fell as she bit her sleeve to keep anyone from hearing her, despite her husband being right there, the heavy breathing echoing within her own head. The King quickly ran over and scooped her up in his arms.

"There, there...shhh..." he said, rocking her frail body. "It's alright...don't cry...no, cry. Cry till yer tears run out...there..."

Elinor had never allowed herself the pleasure of sadness or pain since she was little. For years, she had kept herself cooped up inside to protect everyone around her. Now here she was, grasping her husband's sleeve, crying loudly into his chest.

Merida's breathing had increased to heavy huffs as she listened her father's words of comfort. The princess had come to try to talk to the Queen, but when she got there, the King was already inside talking to her, so Merida had heard everything. Merida kept her back to the wall of the hallway, the Queen's loud sobs bouncing off the walls, impaling themselves into Merida's ears.

The princess covered her mouth to keep a sudden gasp from entering her lungs, and she ran down the hallway to her own room, her own tears blurring her view as she fell onto her bed.

Ah can't talk to her now...Not now...Not ever...

****A Plan****

The next morning was only filled with tension and nonchalance. Hiccup felt a bit awkward sitting at the table with the royal family as he did every morning, insisting on just eating in the kitchen, but the Queen always insisted that he stay with them. However this morning in particular, it was King Fergus that made him stay, as the Queen sat in silence, not looking up, and not even picking up a utensil to eat her food. Here eyes were red, and Hiccup could see Merida's were as well, and she too, hadn't even touched her food.

"So, uh...Merida, do you have any lessons today?" Hiccup asked, startling everyone at the table, even the princes who had noticed the strange behavior of their mother, and decided now would be a good time to stay quiet.

But Merida didn't even look up at him, she just nodded her head, some of her curls falling in her face.

"What will you be doing?" he said slowly, leaning his head over to see her face better, though more curls fell into her face when she shrugged her shoulders.

Hiccup looked around the table. He could definitely tell something

was up, he just didn't know what. King Fergus was leaning back, slowly eating his food, all the while staring at his wife, who had her head down like Merida. The only ones who seemed just as confused as Hiccup were the princes, who quickly ran out of the room as soon as they were excused by their father.

The following lesson with the noblewomen wasn't much different. No one else was around, but that only made the tension increase. Instead of trying Merida's musical abilities as they would have every five days, the two of them sat in silence, the complaints of a farmer to the King about the previous night's wind echoing through the castle.

Occasionally, the Queen would look up to see her daughter's face, but then quickly look away again, afraid of seeing a scowl on her daughter's face. However Merida was just as scared as the Queen, and it was only until one of the maids came in to announce lunch did they stop sitting in silence and leave the room. Even during the evening when they were alone, they sat in silence, contemplating about each other.

This continued for the next four days before anyone tried to do anything about it. The King was tired of seeing his dear Elinor in pain, so he knew it was time to act as patriarch and change the matter.

He paced the throne room, his loyal hunting dogs asleep on the floor, breathing heavily. His wooden peg clunked with every other step as he ran over in his mind what he was going to say as soon as they came. Suddenly the giant oak doors opened as Hiccup walked in, his own prosthetic making a racket. The boy was covered head to toe in soot from working the fires all day, and his arms were sore from bending metals, straightening swords, sharpening spear heads, and everything else he had to do that kept him from working on his original project.

Fergus saw him, and before he could even close the door, the King rushed over to him and grabbed his tired shoulders.

"Wha- ow! Oh, Your Majesty!" Hiccup attempted a small bow out of habit, but the King's grasp kept him from moving.

"Ah need ta talk to ye lad." he said in his usual gruff voice, and without even waiting for him to answer, he dragged him to a small room with no windows. He plopped the confused boy down in a small wooden chair, and secured the door.

"Uh, did I do something wrong, Your Majesty?" said Hiccup, noticing the unusual scenery.

"What? No." the King replied, sitting in his own chair. "But we need to speak in private."

"About what?" Hiccup was a bit less scared, but his nervousness only increased.

Fergus opened his mouth, then closed it again, trying to remember everything he was going to say. He stared into Hiccup's face, forcing Hiccup to raise his eyebrows, hoping for a good answer.

"Well, you an' Merida have gotten close lately, an' ah need ta know...has she ever talked with ye about her mother?"

Hiccup relaxed a bit, glad that SOMEONE besides himself noticed the unusual tension between the pair.

"Well, yes. But not anytime recently. In fact, she hasn't talked to me at all for almost a week now."

"Aye, neither has Elinor t' me. Ever since she-" the King cut himself off, not wanting to embarrass his dear wife. _Though..._he looked back at Hiccup...this lad is honest...an' he seems sincere..._

"Well, four nights ago, th' Queen...had a breakdown." The King waited for a reaction, but Hiccup gave none and he continued on, "She believes Merida hates her, an' she won't listen to reason."

"Merida doesn't hate her!" Hiccup protested. "In fact she's scared of disappointment and disapproval from her mother!"

The King leaned back, thinking. "She is, huh? Then why does she run away all th' time?"

Hiccup shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe she feels it's better to leave than fail."

"So they're just afraid of each other then?"

"I suppose so?"

"Then she shoulda listened ta me!" The King stood up, his swinging arms nearly hitting Hiccup in the face. "If she had jus' talked with her, we wouldn't be in this mess!"

"You and me both." said Hiccup, rolling his eyes, then straightened his posture, remembering he was in the presence of the King.

"So they jus' need ta talk to each other." a smiled grew across Fergus' face.

"If I may, Your Majesty, they won't even look at each other anymore. If this continues on, they might not even want to be in the same room with each other."

King Fergus face went sour again, and he paced the room, thinking of a solution. Suddenly, he stopped and looked back down at Hiccup.

"Why don't YOU make 'em talk t' each other?"

Hiccup's eyes widened, afraid to get any more mixed up in this drama. "ME? Your Majesty?"

"Merida trusts ye, an' th' Queen would listen to ya. Yer our guest!"

"B-but Your Majesty-"

"Well then! That settles it!" and the King opened the door, leaving

Hiccup sitting alone in a dark room, stunned and confused on what to do. He now realized why the Queen took on many of the duties in the kingdom.

****Two Days Later****

Merida decided not to go to breakfast. Every time she attempted to look her mother in the eye, her hands went numb and she felt like throwing up. Instead, she sat in her bed, still in her nightgown, staring out the window. Occasionally a lone bird would fly by, disturbing the peaceful view of the sky. The loud shouts and calls of businessmen and buyers from the marketplace flowed into her room.

Slowly, she walked in front a mirror sitting in the corner, letting her reflection come into view. It was obvious she was in shambles. Her hair was even more raggedy than usual, though it had lost some of it's fiery radiance, and her cheeks were stained red with tear streaks bleeding down her face. She sighed at her reflection and walked back over to sit back on her bed. Pulling her covers over her, she rolled over thinking about her mother from a week before as she had every night.

Suddenly, she heard a knock at her door and she sat up, expecting Maudie or one of the other maids.

"Come in," she called in a hoarse voice, about to pull her nightgown off, but stopped when she realized who it really was.

"Hi." said Hiccup, stepping inside, a small brown package in his right hand.

"Oh," Merida cleared her voice, "Mornin', Hiccup."

Hiccup walked over, holding up the package. "I brought something for you."

He sat on the bed next to her, carefully unwrapping a small, shiny metal object. Holding it up, Merida could see it was her request. Hiccup placed a beautifully carved silver necklace with a Celtic design of three bears into Merida's hands.

"Sorry it took me so long." he said. "Ailean worked me hard, and some days I couldn't even work on it." Hiccup hid the fact that for the past two days, he had worked on nothing but the necklace.

Merida held it up, looking at its beautiful radiance in the morning sun, the hand-made chain sending pieces of light into her eyes.

"Thank ye." said Merida fingering the beautiful jewelry. "Oh, ah still need t' pay ye."

"No, you don't have to pay me for it."

"Aye, ah do!" Merida stood up, looking him in the eye.

"Well, then. Give this to your mother, and I'll accept that as payment." Hiccup smiled at her, but Merida's eyes were filled with fear, and she began to panic.

Shaking her head, she took a few steps back, shoving the necklace back in Hiccup's hands. "No, no. Ah can't."

"Sure you can! I'll even go with you." Then in a swift movement, Hiccup put an arm around her back and pushed her through the doorway. Normally, the princess would be much stronger than this skinny blacksmith, but there was a part of her that wanted to follow him to face her fear.

The two of them walked downstairs, Merida's eyes widening with each step. After what seemed like an eternity, they reached the dining table, where the rest of the family members were waiting. Hiccup half-guided, half-pushed Merida over to her mother, and he and the King, along with the princes left the room just after shoving the necklace into her hands.

For a while, Merida just stood there, opening and closing her mouth. The Queen didn't even look at her daughter, her eyes widened as well.

"Ah-Ah brought somethin' fer ya." Merida sputtered.

The Queen's head turned slightly as Merida held her hands out, revealing the ornament. Her eyes widened for a moment, recognizing the design, and her eyes focused on Merida.

"I thought you said you lost it."

Merida didn't want to deny it, but she couldn't hide the truth from her mother any longer.

"Ah had used it ta pay fer th' spell ah used to turn ye into a bear. Hiccup was kind enough ta make a new one fer ye."

Elinor ran her slender fingers over the object, lifting it from Merida's trembling hands. But as soon as Merida felt her mother's touch, she fell apart. Her hands dropped and tears fell like comets from her eyes.

"Ah'm sorry mum! Ah never hated ye! Ah was jus' scared! Scared ah couldn't be th' daughter ye wanted!"

Elinor quickly stood and wrapped her arms around the girl, tears rolling from her eyes as well.

"Oh, Merida. I couldn't have asked for a better daughter." she squeezed hard preventing Merida from wrapping her own arms around her slender mother.

Kissing her daughter's head, she whispered three sweet words that resolved their problem for eternity...

...I love you...

****Snow****

Stoick was able to cope with the disappearance of his son since Astrid left with Toothless, but after the second month he began to worry again. Then another month flew by and there was still no sign

of Astrid or Hiccup. By now winter had come, the blistering winds stinging his face whenever he took a step outside, so he couldn't stand by the docks as he did before. To make matters worse, Snoggletog was on it's way, and this would be the first year celebrating without his son.

Pushing his way through the snow, he carried a boatload of dried fish to the Great Hall for some of the homeless dragons. As he opened the doors all the scaly creatures lifted their heads, excited for food and tackled the chief. Pushing them off him, he threw the fish to the middle of the hall, the dragons following after it, devouring every speck of meat. Closing the large door behind him, he entered the cold again, making his way to his home. The falling snow wasn't too thick, and the lights from the houses helped him to find his way through the village, but his thoughts drifted to Hiccup again, wondering if he was alright...or alive. Grunting, he plowed through the snow, shoving most of it away so he could open his door, the warmth of a small fire welcoming him in as soon as it budged.

But to his surprise, a familiar figure was curled by his fireplace, blowing on their hands to try to warm them, though their breath was just as cold as the rest of their body. Small icicles slowly melted off their blonde braid.

"Astrid?" Stoick exclaimed, rushing over. He could see she was very weak, as well as Stormfly who was curled up next to her.

"Chief Stoick!" she tried to get up, but her hand shook, and the large man placed a hand on her shoulder, allowing her to rest.

A bit excited from her appearance, he looked up the wooden stairs hoping to see another familiar figure.

"He's not there." said Astrid. "We never found him." cold breath ran out of her lungs as she tried to explain herself, "After my own food ran out, Stormfly hunted for a bit more for my sake, but soon the fish began to thin out, and we had to turn back."

"What about Toothless?"

"He's probably still out looking. That dragon will keep going till he dies."

Stoick nodded, and grabbed a blanket to wrap the freezing viking in while he placed a dried fish over the fire.

"How far did you get?"

"We went East for a while, then I noticed the weather was getting warmer so I guess we were headed South. It's hard to tell where you're going in the middle of the ocean." she coughed out more cold air, scooting a bit closer to the fire to warm up.

"How'd you find your way back then?"

"I don't know..." Astrid was getting warmer, though she still shivered violently. "I just said to Stormfly that we ought to head back, and she just began to fly toward here." she looked over to her blue dragon, "It's like they have a sense that allows them to return to wherever they've lived before."

The chief raised his eyebrows, "It'd explain how all the dragons could find their nest before."

Astrid nodded then the room was filled with more coughs. She raised her hands, rubbing them together, putting them close to the fire. It was at that moment that Stoick noticed her fingers were a bluish-black color. His eyes opened wide, and immediately he grabbed a bucket of water and put it over the fire, then he grabbed more blankets and threw them over Astrid, who began coughing more and more. She kept coughing till a red liquid seeped between her lips, and Stoick knew he had to get help. After throwing a log onto the fire to get it blazing, he ran out the door to find someone who would know what to do. As he was gone, Astrid ran over in her mind the journey they just endured.

I should've kept going... she thought in her mind as she watched the flames lick the bottom of the bucket of water. _We could've kept going...Why did I say to stop?..._ A tear rolled down her cheek.

...I'm sorry...Hiccup...

7. Chapter 7

****Winter Fun****

_... . . . _

Hiccup wrapped himself in a cloak given to him by Queen Elinor, and trudged along the stony path, neatly covered in snow. His fake foot made a racket as it did every morning, annoying and waking many of the villagers. Finally, he reached the shop, a blazing heat blowing into his face as he walked in. Satisfied, he unwrapped the cloak, set it on a wooden table then moved to the back to see what Ailean needed him to do that day.

Hiccup had gotten used to living in Scotland after the four months of hiding his identity and living as a blacksmith apprentice. He had been able to learn all the different roads and areas of the kingdom in that short time thanks to all the errands Ailean sent him on. His longing to return home still lingered and the aching in his heart for his friend remained, but as time went by, it lessened ever so slightly.

"Glad ye could make it." Ailean said as he hammered against a strangely bent sword. Whoever was fighting with it obviously had no idea how to handle it.

"Yeah. Well, is that today's main project?" Hiccup replied, gesturing to the heated sword, and a pile of other broad swords he noticed were sitting in a pile next to Ailean.

The blacksmith nodded, "More or less. Army never takes care o' their own swords. Got ta do everythin' fer them!" Ailean mumbled a bit more as Hiccup lifted a small amount of the weapons to the furnace so the blades would be malleable enough to bend back into shape. He then grabbed a shovel to feed the fire and threw coals into the flames.

Hours went by, and soon Hiccup became hot from the blazing furnace and the constant moving throughout the shop. Taking a break from his work, he set down one of the bent up swords and opened a window to let the cool winter air blow in his sweaty face. Outside, people were walking, children playing, businessmen shouting. He sighed as a smile grew on his face. Though he missed the viking life on Berk, he couldn't help but love the land of Scotland.

His smile grew wider and he began waving his hand high in the air as he saw a familiar redhead figure skip down the cobblestone. Merida waved back and quickened her step to meet her friend.

Hiccup opened the door for her as soon as she was close enough, and she removed her own black hooded cloak that she always used.

"Phew, it's quite hot in here." she exclaimed, setting her cloak next to Hiccup's.

"How was your lesson of the day?"

"Alright. Ah may not be very good at sewin' tapestries, but mah mum an' I discovered ah do pretty well with yarn. So she got me on a new crochet project. She says it's SUPPOSED to be a blanket, though it looks more like a scarf at th' moment."

Hiccup chuckled at her as he got back to work, despite the heat filling his head again. Merida sat in a stool by his work space as she continued talking. The day went on like this as usual. The princess always felt comfort when talking to Hiccup now, since he was the catalyst of her and her mother ever coming together again. Though soon she began to get tired of sitting in the shop, since she was doing most of the talking anyway. So she picked up a sword Hiccup had just barely finished repairing, and swung it close to the young blacksmith's face, nearly cutting him.

"Woah, woah, woah." said Hiccup, raising his hands. But Merida lunged at him with another attack, forcing him to scramble away.

"Hey! C'mon this isn't fair." he protested. She swung the large blade again as Hiccup dodged. "I don't have time for this today...and I just fixed that!" He continued to dodge and run as she added a few more dents and scrapes to the shop around them.

"Learn ta fight an' ah'll surrender peacefully." Merida replied with a smirk, taunting him as she threw him a sword. Hiccup groaned as he caught it. Merida had been trying to teach him to fight for weeks since he seemed like such a weakling, though he always complained about being tired or not having time to learn, so Merida would often challenge him to a duel randomly during the day.

"Now then..." she said, raising her blade to defend herself for any attack Hiccup would send at her, though he gave none. She narrowed her eyes, then sent another swing at him. He raised his own blade to block her attack, though the force of it sent him stumbling backwards, pushing him out the door and into the frosty cold. He quickly gathered himself up and began running away as he saw a small figure with a sword charging at him.

The pair of them ran all throughout the village, sometimes knocking

into people, earning some negative remarks and exclamations, others just laughing as they saw them run by. Unfortunately for Hiccup, his new prosthetic made it hard for him to run, especially when he had to lug a broadsword with him. His breath trailed behind him, though not for long when his metal foot came in contact with a stray piece of ice on the stone, and he was sent flying on his back. A loud THUMP was heard as he collided with the ground, his sword falling away from his hands.

"Are ye alright?" Merida's long curls were soon in his face as she crouched over him.

"Yeah..." he huffed, trying to sit up. She grabbed his arm and pulled him up, allowing him to sit in the snow for a bit to rest.

"Maybe next time ye'll consider facing me instead of runnin' away." she smirked after confirming he was okay.

Hiccup gave her a glare, then picked up the fallen sword, "Well now I have to go sharpen these...again." He reached over to take the sword from Merida's hand, but she pulled it away.

"No, ye need ta take a break. Ye've been workin' too hard. Here..." quickly, she grabbed the sword from Hiccup's hand, and gave them to a local boy, instructing him to run them over to Ailean. Then she pulled out a few coins from her pocket and placed them in his hands. After the boy had run off, she turned to Hiccup who was now standing.

"Now I'm covered in snow..." said Hiccup, raising an eyebrow to Merida.

"Well, it was sort of yer own fault."

"True. But I don't have to be the only one." suddenly he pulled a snowball from behind his back and threw it at the unsuspecting girl.

She raised her arms just in time before the powdery snow exploded against her body. Laughing, she gathered some snow in her cold fingers and shaped it before letting it sail through the air toward Hiccup. Soon a fight broke out, and snow was flying everywhere. Some of the village children passing by decided to join in the fun, and they even created teams, some on Merida's, some on Hiccup's. A few even tried to create a fort to hide behind, but their absence from the fun was noticed, and they were pelted with snowballs from every direction.

Merida laughed and laughed till she couldn't laugh any more, and she threw herself into the snow. She looked up to the sky. Was it dark already? The gray sky had darkened, and though no stars were showing, everyone could tell nightfall was upon them. Many of the children said goodbye and ran off to their warm homes.

Hiccup plopped down next to Merida, his face bright red from all the excitement. For a moment, they just sat there, looking up at the sky, allowing the energy to drain from them.

Merida exhaled, a white puff of air disappearing in the gentle wind. Soon, the streets were empty, and all that remained was the princess

and the blacksmith.

"Thank ye, Hiccup..." Merida said, breaking the silence.

"For what?"

"Bein' a friend. Ye've only been here a short while, yet yer th' person ah trust the most. Ye've listened to mah problems, an' even solved one of them fer me. Ah only wish ah could do the same fer you." She looked over to see his reaction, but his expression was blank.

Hiccup searched through his thoughts in his mind. She trusted him, yet knew practically nothing about him. He should tell her who he is. No. He needed to tell her. _I can't keep going on like this forever._ He thought, but nothing came up. He opened his mouth to force the words out, but he had no idea what words to utter.

"Merida..." was all he could mutter.

"Hmm?" her eyes were still fixed on him, searching for something they could not find.

Though Hiccup remained silent, his mouth still open, trying to find the courage to tell her everything. But in truth, he was terrified. Scots and vikings were enemies. Would she be angry with him? Or worse, would she really try to kill him? In his months of living there, he knew there was no possible way he could stand up to her in a battle. Not that he would ever want to. She was his only friend at the moment.

"What is it?" Merida was beginning to get impatient.

Hiccup knew he couldn't tell her now. There was no way. Quickly he searched for something to say in his mind that hopefully wouldn't sound stupid as soon as he said it.

"Uhhh...wwwwhen's your birthday?" he shut his eyes. It even sounded stupid in his mind.

"Mah birthday?" Merida raised an eyebrow, still looking at Hiccup. "Well, if ye must know, ah was born in th' summer. No where close to now."

"Oh...glad to know I didn't miss it!" Hiccup looked over at her, trying to give a weak smile, but it didn't seem to phase Merida.

"So what about you?"

"Huh? me?"

"Aye! When is yer birthday?"

"Oh, well...my birthday was a few weeks ago."

"WHAT?" Merida sat straight up. "Why didn't ye tell me?"

Hiccup shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't think it mattered much..."

"It most certainly DOES matter! How old are ye now?"

"I'm still only seventeen."

"'ONLY seventeen' ye say? Yer practically a man now!"

Hiccup chuckled. He never considered himself ever becoming a man. Especially since he had to eventually fill his father's shoes as chief of the village. If he ever got back, anyway.

"Age doesn't define whether you're a man or not. Where I come from, it's what you do. How much glory you can attain. I'm not a man."

Merida could see a sad look in his eyes. It was at times like this when he seemed so distant.

"Not yet." she added in to his statement.

He gave a sarcastic scoff before turning his head away from her. In the distance he could see the snow covered ships neatly tied to the docks.

Merida could tell he didn't want to talk any longer, though it burned her inside every time he did this. She wanted to know more about him. Where was he from? What did he do? Why is he here? She sighed. Now was not the time for that.

They both looked back to the sky, and remained in silence for another hour. By then the sky had darkened even more, and a shiver went through Merida's body. Winds blew in from the mountains as they finally decided to get to a warm fire in the castle. The two teased each other for not remembering the cloaks that they left in the blacksmith's shop. Though each wrapped themselves up in blankets after changing into dry clothes, curling up next to their own personal fireplaces. Soon they passed into a deep, deep sleep.

****Memories****

There it was. Red Death. The monstrous beast of the Dragon Nest. Hiccup could see his reflection in three of its six eyes. But where was Toothless? He looked behind him to see his father with someone. "Mom!" he ran off to her, but she began to sink into the ocean with Stoick. He tried to dive into the water, but it was frozen solid. Under the ice he could see Toothless at the bottom, tied up in the very trap he first caught him in. He tried to break the ice, but Toothless seemed to get farther and farther away with every hit. He looked back to see Red Death throw something at him with its mouth. It was a leg. Hiccup's left leg that he lost before. Blood ran from the end of it, surrounding Hiccup and swallowing him up. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't see. He couldn't even move.

Hiccup gasped. He was still on the floor when he fell asleep next to the fire, which had died down. He began pulling his blankets off him which were wrapped tightly around his arms, legs and neck. He looked around, letting reality come back to him. Sighing, he curled up, pulling his knees close to his chest. His nightmares haven't been that bad in a while. Desperately, he pulled out his notebook, flipping to a familiar page. There, he saw his first sketch of

Toothless. A small teardrop fell, smearing some of the fading charcoal.

****Interrogation****

A few mornings after the snow fun, Merida came to a decision. Quickly she got dressed in a dark green dress, clipped her quiver to her waist, and grabbed her bow before making her way down the stairs. As usual, everyone else was already eating breakfast. As she made her way to the table, she eyed everyone that was there. Elinor was pouring over letters and documents, some she could tell had the seal of the clan leaders on them. The boys were stuffing their mouths in a hurry to get into mischief while Fergus and Hiccup ate in silence.

"Morning, dear." said Queen Elinor, not looking up from her letters. "Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough." she replied. "How did everyone else sleep?" she said loudly, startling a half-asleep King.

"We had a good night's rest, right Fergus?" Elinor said, trying to keep her husband awake.

"Aye..." he said groggily.

The triplets nodded to their sister, then ran off upstairs with devilish little smiles on their faces.

"What about you, Hiccup?" Merida questioned, coming up next to him.

Hiccup looked up at her, slightly confused at her demanding tone. "Uhh...good I suppose?"

"Good, then ye have energy for a ride. Let's go." Merida grabbed his arm and dragged him outside.

"Woah! Ohhhh-kay?"

Elinor eyed her daughter as the pair left the room. "Merida, where are you going?" But the princess didn't reply as the large oak doors closed behind her. She looked back at her husband for an answer, but she became slightly annoyed to see his eyes closed and his chin resting on the table.

Meanwhile, Angus carried a young pair on his back through the forest. The trees were still painted white, and the crisp air penetrated all their lungs with each crunch of the snow the horse's hooves made. Hiccup had no idea what was going on through Merida's head. He held himself to her back tightly as to not fall off the steed, occasionally getting a mouthful of red hair. Eventually Merida allowed the horse to slow to a walk, letting everyone catch their breaths.

"What are you doing?" said Hiccup, letting go of her waist.

"So ye slept well, huh?"

Hiccup's eyebrows furrowed, and he leaned over to try to see her

face. But her mane prevented him from seeing anything. "Yeah..." he said slowly. "Why is that?"

"Do you always sleep that well?"

Hiccup grabbed her shoulder. "Yeah, sure. What is this all about?" he tried to turn her, but she shrugged him off.

"Why do ye lie to me?" she pulled the reigns and Angus halted to a stop.

"What? I-I didn't."

She turned to face him. "Ah can hear ye at night. Ye can never get a good night's sleep."

"Okay, sure. I toss in my sleep, that's no reason to get so huffy."

"Ye also scream. Ah can hear ye calling something, but every time ah try ta make it out, it changes to something else."

"So I talk in my sleep too. What does this have to do with anything?"

"Who are ye, Hiccup?"

"What?"

"Ah can tell ye have nightmares, but of what? Yer scared of somethin', but ah don't know what it is."

"Well, what business is it of yours?"

"Hmph." She clicked her tongue and Angus continued walking. "Was it any business of yours about mah mum an' I?"

"Okay, fair enough. But why be so forceful?"

"Ah'm makin' it so ye can't run away again. No more smithin', no more gettin' distracted."

Hiccup looked around. He had been in the forest with Merida before, though he didn't know the land as well as she did, so there was no way he could find his way back.

"In all truth," Merida continued, "Ah'm worried about ye. Durin' the day, ye seem normal an' fun. But sometimes ye become all distant...an' in pain..." she looked straight ahead of her. "Ye helped me already. Ah want ta help ye, but ah can't. Ah know nothin' about ye, an' it hurts...ah promise ah'll listen the way ye listened to me..."

Hiccup sighed. He knew he had to tell her sometime sooner or later, but this was all too sudden. He wasn't prepared at all. Where should he start? Without thinking, he slipped off the still moving horse, nearly falling on his face from the fall.

"What are ye doin'?" Merida stopped Angus and got off, making sure he was alright.

"I'm fine. But I think we should sit down if you want to hear my story." Hiccup brushed some snow off a fallen tree and sat down, gesturing for Merida to do the same. After tying Angus to a small tree, she sat down next to him, waiting.

"You're right. I did lie to you." Merida shifted her cloak to hide her discomfort. She was a bit hurt from his statement, but she was glad he was finally talking to her. "You remember how I told you how I lost my leg?"

She nodded, "Ye stepped into a fire."

"Also a lie. My leg WAS burned, but only after battling a large dragon."

"DRAGON?" Merida stood up. "Dragons aren't real."

"Yes, they are. I even trained one."

She took a step back. "Are ye makin' fun of me? Ah was just tryin' ta get ta know ye so ah could help ye!"

"No, I'm not making fun of you. It's the truth I swear."

"Ah may not be as smart as you, but ah'm not thick."

"Merida, please try to understand." Hiccup himself was now standing as well. "Some things are difficult to understand, I get it. Okay? I didn't believe in magic till you told me you turned your mom into a bear. Where I come from, we don't have magic, but we do have dragons."

"An' WHERE are ye from?"

"I'm..._sigh_...okay. I'm from an island called Berk."

"Never heard of it."

"Probably because we're one of the smallest viking clans out there."

Merida's blue eyes widened. "Yer a viking?"

"Okay, yeah. I'm a viking! From the Hairy Hooligan tribe to be exact."

Merida couldn't take it any longer. "Yer not a viking! Vikings are supposed ta be large, bulky, and cruel! Ye can't be a viking!"

"I AM a viking."

"No! Stop lyin' ta me!" she pushed him over into the snow. "Ah don't want any more lies!"

She turned to untie Angus, but Hiccup was too quick, and he tackled her to the ground. "Wait!"

"Get off me!" she screamed.

"Would you please just listen to me?" he tried to keep her pinned to the floor as he spoke. "My full name is Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III, son of Stoick the Vast, chief of our tribe. I may not look like a viking, but it's true. In fact, I was a disappointment to my father. Our tribe has been battling dragons for centuries, and to kill a dragon meant everything. Unfortunately I messed up a lot, and I became the laughing stock of the entire village."

Merida didn't want to listen, but every word was engraved into her mind. But there was no way she was going to believe any of it. She forced a jab into his ribs, causing him to stop talking, and she escaped to try to loose Angus again. When Hiccup tried to advance on her again, she raised her bow. She had notched an arrow while he gathered himself, and it was pointing between his eyes.

"Stay back."

"Merida, please try to understand."

"Ah don't have to. Ye can't be a viking. Vikings attacked our shores, nearly destroying all of our clans. Ye can't be." The arrowhead in front of Hiccup's face began to shake as her hands quivered.

"But I am. And I'm sorry for not telling you sooner."

A tear rolled down Merida's red cheek. "Why didn't ye?"

"Well, knowing you were a Celt, I had my own reservations about staying with you. Vikings aren't the only cruel ones."

"What did we do to YOU?"

"You took my mother from me."

Merida lowered her bow. As soon as he said it, Hiccup no longer held an expression of fear, but one of anger and sadness. He sat down in the snow lowered his head.

"When I was only six, my parents and I went out to sea. What for, I no longer remember. We were about to pass a Scottish ship, but they started to attack us. Once we drew them back, they began to shoot arrows at us. My mother was the only one that was hit because she was protecting me."

Merida crouched down next to him. She remembered how her own mother risked her life fighting against Mor'du as a bear. During the entire fight, Merida was afraid she would lose her.

"What was her name?" Merida managed to choke out.

"Vahallarama." said Hiccup quietly. "Every now and then since she died, I would write letters to her, asking her to come home." he pulled out his small, leather notebook and handed it to Merida. "You can read some."

She a bit struck. "No, if it's for yer mum, ah can't read it."

"It's okay. She can't read them now anyway." he said, and he tossed the booklet at Merida's feet.

Hesitantly, she picked it up and opened to the first letter. She looked at Hiccup one last time, but his eyes were focused on something that wasn't in that world. She looked down and began reading...

8. Chapter 8

A Son's Letters

Dear mom,

Where are you? Did you make it to Valhalla*? What's it like there? Is it as good as everyone says it is?

I miss you. I'm sitting in front of your grave now with dad. He misses you too, and he's very sad. Everyone says it will be difficult for dad to raise me on his own. But I was a good boy. Right?

Please come home. I promise I'll be good if you come back.

I love you.

Hiccup

Dear mom,

Today I turned ten. Though I seemed to be the only one that was excited. Birthdays have been less fun since you left. I remember you used to make sure everyone was in the Great Hall having fun and celebrating. But today the only one that celebrated was me. Dad gave me some extra fish for dinner though. I think he wants me to get bigger, though I'm still skinny. Why am I so different? All the other boys are bigger than me. Even some of the girls are bigger.

People tell me I won't be able to be as good a chief as dad. But I try really hard. Sometimes I go out during dragon raids and try to see if I can kill a dragon. I almost got close to a Gronckle. Though dad doesn't want me going outside. He doesn't think I can kill a dragon at my age. But I heard the story of when he killed a dragon when he was really little, so I think I can do it. I'll try harder next time.

I still miss you. When are you coming home? I hope you're safe.

I love you.

Hiccup

Dear mom,

My arms are really tired today. Gobber had me working in the smithy a long time today. I tried harder like I said I would, but the dragon saw me coming. It was a Deadly Nadder. It shot spikes at me, and I had two stuck in my side. It hurt really bad. Unfortunately, when dad came to help me, the dragons made off with more sheep than usual. He told me I was forbidden from stepping outside again. But I've already decided I would kill a dragon, so I'm going to share a secret with you. You can't tell anyone. Promise? Okay, I'm going to kill a Night Fury. No one has killed one yet since you've been gone, so I'll be

the first. I told Gobber already. He says I can't do it. But I will. I'll do it for you. I promise.

I really miss you. Oh, and if you're able to see Gefion**, would you mind asking her to send me a little luck?

I love you.

Hiccup

Dear mom,

Gobber told everyone about my plan to kill a Night Fury. Everyone told me I was crazy. You remember that one girl, Astrid? She stuck her tongue out at me. Girls are so weird.

But I figured out my full plan to kill a Night Fury. I'll have to trap it first. It's too fast for me to kill it while it's moving, so I'll trap it, then I'll cut out its heart.

Mom, do you think if I kill a Night Fury, dad will love me? Sometimes I wonder if he wants me as a son.

Still missing you.

I love you.

Hiccup

Dear mom,

So much has happened. I don't really know where to start. I should have written to you sooner, but I've been pretty busy.

My plan worked. I trapped a Night Fury. It was a lot different than I expected. They have shorter necks than Zipplebacks, but longer than Gronckles. They're completely black, but they have green, cat-like eyes. Also, they have retractable teeth! But I didn't kill it. I don't know why, but when I looked at him, I just couldn't do it. His eyes were so big...and scared. He looked terrified to die. I'm sorry I broke my promise. I'm really sorry. I hope you can forgive me, but it turns out when I trapped it, one of the tail fins on the dragon got ripped off. In all honesty, I feel kinda bad. When dragons fly, they use their tails to point where they're going. But thanks to me, Toothless (I decided to name the Night Fury "Toothless" because of the retractable teeth) can't fly on his own.

So I made him something. I thought about how Gobber has a prosthetic hand and leg, and I thought to myself, "Why can't a dragon have the same thing?" so I made a fake tail fin. Though he can't fly without me. I have to help him open it up since the wind keeps blowing it shut.

Thanks to Toothless, I've learned so much about dragons. Oh, and dad finally allowed me to get into Dragon Training, and I was able to use what I learned from Toothless in the ring. Like, I discovered if you scratch the scales of a dragon under the chin, it will fall to the ground and lie there for a moment. They really like that.

But I have a problem. Yesterday in Dragon Training, I was chosen to

kill the Monstrous Nightmare in front of the entire village. But the thing is, I don't want to kill dragons anymore. They're not as bad as everyone thought. The truth is, they're being controlled. I know, it's confusing, but it's true. But I took Astrid for a ride on Toothless (...it's a long story...) and while we were flying we found the dragon nest. All the dragons are in a sort of trance, and they have to bring back food for a giant dragon that is pretty much the size of the entire village. Yeah, it's that huge. I think we should call it Seadragonus Giganticus Maximus. But if they dragons don't bring back enough food, they get eaten themselves.

Maybe if I can show everyone dragons are not as bad as everyone thinks, we can live in peace like Toothless and I do. (Oh, and on a side note, after our dragon ride, Astrid kissed me! ...on the cheek but hey, a kiss is a kiss right?)

Well, tomorrow I'm going to face the Monstrous Nightmare. Wish me luck. Hopefully everyone will understand. And I hope you of all people understand.

I miss you more than ever.

I love you.

Hiccup

Dear mom,

Nice to know I'm not dead. Nearly died though.

I did my best to show everyone dragons were harmless. I placed my hand in front of the Monstrous Nightmare's nose like how I did to gain Toothless' trust, but things went wrong after that. No, it didn't bite my hand off, though it almost did when dad startled it.

Long story short, it attacked, and Toothless somehow came to my rescue, only to get captured. Call me an idiot, but I let it slip about the Dragon's Nest to dad. He went out and used Toothless to find it since only a dragon can find it, and I couldn't do a thing. All I could do was watch them leave from a distance.

But, thanks to Astrid, and all the others who were in dragon training with me (Snoutlout, Fishlegs, Ruffnut, Tuffnut) I was able to snap out of it and go after dad to try to stop him. Or save him.

Unfortunately, by the time we got there, Red Death (what we actually called the Seadragonus Giganticus Maximus) was out of the volcano, and dad was trying to fight it. Or...more of distracting it. I think he was trying to get it's attention so everyone could get away. He's a good chief like that.

Well, we found Toothless, but I wasn't strong enough to free him, and if it wasn't for dad, I think we both would have drowned after falling in the ocean.

And guess what? Just before I left to face Red Death, dad took my hand, and said he was proud of me. Can you believe it? DAD SAID HE WAS PROUD OF ME! I had never felt happier in my life!

Well, just to keep you up to date, I did face Red Death, and Toothless and I managed to beat it. Turns out dragons may be fireproof on the outside, but not so much on the inside. Though because it was so big, after we set fire to it, it pretty much sent off a giant explosion, and I fell into it.

Of course, I'm fine. But not all of me made it back. When people die? Do they get their limbs back? Because if not, the next time you see me, I won't have a left foot. But now Toothless and I match. He doesn't have a left tail fin, and I don't have a left foot. Now we can't go anywhere without each other. But I suppose that makes our friendship stronger.

Also, what are you wearing right now? Cuz dad and I have been wearing your breastplate on our heads...as helmets. It was his idea to always remember you, but if you want it back, I completely understand.

Things have been better in Berk now. We even set up a new Dragon Academy to train dragons instead of kill them, and there is a lot more peace here than ever. So you can come home now. You can even have your own dragon. I feel like you would like the Fireworms. They don't engage in battle, they're afraid of fire, but their skin is so hot. Even hotter than the sun.

You didn't like battle much either, but you had something about you no one else had. And I miss you for it. Please come home.

I love you.

Hiccup

Dear mom,

It's Snoggletog! Our very first Snoggletog with the dragons. Oh, and you remember our trip before you...got shot? How you told me one day I might find out why the dragons don't come to attack for a couple weeks? I figured it out! Apparently they leave around the same time as Snoggletog to a warm island to breed.

I remember Snoggletog when you were still here. You always used to put a little something extra in my helmet. And you always carried me on your back when heading up to the Great Hall for the party. Dad always made sure to be next to you, holding your hand for the group dances, and I was on your other side.

I miss you. I miss the way you yelled at dad for drinking too much. I miss you being the last thing I saw before falling asleep. I miss your laughing when Uncle Spitelout, Gobber and dad would sing ridiculous songs at the top of their lungs. I miss how you always used to stroke my hair and kiss my head before sending me off to bed so I wouldn't stay up too late. Please come home so we can spend Snoggletog together.

I love you.

Hiccup

Dear mom,

Please don't hate me, but I forgot today was your anniversary. I've been so busy with the dragons that it somehow slipped my mind. Here I am in front of your grave. I brought Toothless along so he could meet you. I think he likes you.

Dad and I have been getting along better, and I have a girlfriend believe it or not. You remember me telling you my foot was missing? Well, the day I found out, Astrid kissed me! Not on the cheek though, on the lips. So things have been going well...sort of.

I have a question to ask: How did you get people to look up to you? I mean, I know you were the chief's wife and all, but even if you weren't, I'm sure people would still hold you with respect. People tell me it was because you were a great speaker. Dad says it was because you had a light inside you and you made sure everyone saw it and respected you for it.

Today, people hold me with respect, but as Hiccup, slayer of Red Death. I think they all remember me for something I don't want to be remembered by. Sure, it was a great thing for both us and the dragons, but I don't want to die and have people think of me as a Dragon Slayer. For years, I have wanted recognition and respect, but now that I have it, I don't want it any more.

Please help me. I still miss you. Do you miss me?

I love you.

Hiccup

Dear mom,

Something extraordinary happened. After I finished writing that last letter, Toothless and I got caught in a storm. We were scared to death, and we tried to fly through it, but the winds were too strong. Both of us were sent flying into the ocean, and that's how we got separated.

I tried to swim to him, but it was really dark and cold. Soon I got tired, but I knew I couldn't stop. Then, when I thought I'd drown, I woke up in a foreign land. I am now a guest of a royal family in Scotland. Can you believe it? The very people I hated and despised had saved my life. Though I don't think the people here are the ones who killed you. I only wish I remembered what the symbol was on the ship that attacked us.

I think you'd really like it here. It's warmer than Berk, and the people are a lot more nice to me. They have a monarchy here, and the king's name is Fergus. He too is missing a left foot. Though he lost his to a demon bear whose name I cannot remember for some reason. Kind of embarrassing since he talks about it all the time. He's pretty much a big as dad, though he's a lot closer to his family.

Though he is king, the queen seems to be the one who's REALLY in charge around here. She's called Queen Elinor, and she actually reminds me a lot of you. She's not much of a fighter, but whenever she speaks, she can make anyone hold their tongue. Though she has an air about her that is so...intimidating. I dunno, it just feels like

whenever she looks at me, I feel like she's going to bite my head off.

They have four children. The three youngest are triplets. I would guesstimate their age to be seven, but I should probably ask. They're quite fun to be around, though sometimes it's slightly annoying since the LOVE to prank everyone and everything.

And then there's the eldest, which is a girl. Her name is Merida. She was the one who saved me from my watery grave. I'll admit, there's something about her that is slightly...familiar. She's not your average princess that you hear in tales about the Scots, instead she's strong, brave, and adventurous. She's quite the archer, though I always feel a bit uncomfortable watching her shoot since that's the weapon that made you...you know. But she and I have become somewhat friends. Not quite sure how she feels just yet, but I hope we can become great friends in the future.

The land here is beautiful, but I still miss Berk. I made it out of the storm somehow, but I still have no idea what happened to Toothless. I suppose everyone might be worried, but I haven't seen anyone yet. Who knows, maybe I'll be stuck here forever. I have no idea how to get back to Berk. All I know is that it's North.

Now, I've said many times before that I hope you come home. If you get there before me, could you let everyone know I'm alright, and tell dad not to worry about me. And if Toothless made it back home, tell him I'm sorry.

But if you want to come here, that's fine too. I wouldn't mind seeing your face again. Even if it's only for a second, I want to see you again. Hopefully sooner than later, because I think my memory of you is beginning to blur. But I don't want it to. Please, please come home. I miss you too much.

I love you.

Hiccup

* * *

><p>*In Norse mythology, Valhalla was a realm presided over by Odin, and he and his Valkyries choose those who have fallen in battle to join them.<p>

**Norse goddess of vegetation and fertility. She symbolizes luck, virginity, fertility, and growth.

9. Chapter 9

Reaction

It was very cold. Snow covered the glen like a blanket, icicles glittered like diamonds in the afternoon light. It seemed all the water in the land had froze, except for hot tears dripping onto the ground.

All the while Merida read the letters, she couldn't help but silently cry. Just a few moments ago she was ready to shoot her friend, now

all she can feel is guilt and sadness. Occasionally, there were moments she wanted to ask Hiccup about a few things she didn't understand, but she couldn't stop reading. By the time she had, she couldn't even mutter a word. The leather booklet trembled in her cold hands, her bow and readied arrow now lay uselessly next to her leg.

Hiccup sat perfectly still like a carved statue. Never looking up, never saying a word. He simply waited for her to finish.

They remained in silence as a confused Clydesdale watched their every move. All he knew was Merida was in distress, so he tried to inch his way to comfort his owner by blowing her hair with his nostrils as he always did, but he was too far away. He snorted and stomped the snow, trying to get her attention, but her face remained hidden. It was only when he gave a small whinny when she finally looked up, but not at him. Her face was instead turned to the viking.

In all seriousness, she had no idea what to do. She didn't know what to say. She didn't know what to think. True, he was a viking: an enemy to the clans since before time, but he was unlike any other viking she imagined. And he himself proved he was harmless, he even let her see something very precious to him. But what if he was lying to her? A lump formed in her throat, but she coughed it away before talking.

"What was yer mum like?"

Hiccup still didn't look up, though his eyes traveled along the snow in front of him. "She wasn't strong in muscle, but she was strong in words. Everything she said sounded like dragon fire or silver bells. She was the only one who accepted me as I was, and she encouraged me to do things differently than everyone else."

He went silent again, though now he began picking at a stick fallen from a tree. Merida looked back to the letters, trying to imagine Hiccup's mother reading them. Quietly, she closed the book and handed it back to Hiccup.

"Ah'm sure she's very proud of you." she said in an attempt to bring him back to Earth.

Hiccup still didn't meet her gaze. He just raised his hand to take the book and opened it to a fairly recent page. It had a strange drawing on it that Merida saw briefly as she flipped through the pages to find the letters. After turning it around, Merida could see it took up both open pages, taking the shape of what appeared to be a dragon. It had a wide wing-span protruding from its front shoulders, while a smaller set of fan-like wings opened on the hips. On the tail were two fins, though the left one looked as though it had been drawn, smudged, then re-drawn.

"This is Toothless." said Hiccup, "Meeting him was probably the best thing that happened to me, but it doesn't matter much now. I lost him in the storm and there's no way I can go out to find him."

The lump came back to Merida's throat, a surge of pain beating itself through her heart and into her head.

"But," he continued, "By losing him, I found new friends that

accepted me for who I was, not what I did. Everyone back home only recognized me when I did well at dragon training, or when I defeated Red Death. So...oh gosh, what am I trying to say?...Thanks, I guess."

The corners of Merida's mouth raised a little bit, but fell again once she looked back to the faded drawing. Her head began spinning, and she looked away. She sniffed away another tear before she could look back at Hiccup, who was waiting for a word, a phrase, but Merida turned away again as guilt filled her entire core.

She kept glancing back at him, but never said a word. Though that was all Hiccup wanted at the moment. He needed an assurance that he made the right decision, and that he could trust her.

"Merida..." he started after a few long moments. "I-"

"Ah'm sorry ah pressured ye so much." Merida said quickly, interrupting Hiccup.

Hiccup smiled a bit. He felt better now that she was speaking. "That's alright." he replied.

"No, it isn't. Ye already had enough pressure from yer home, an' ah pressured ye ta get somethin' only fer myself. Ah was selfish, an' ah shouldn't have forced ye out here."

"The way I see it, you freed me."

Merida gave him a quizzical look. "In what way?"

"Well, when I first woke up, I knew I was in Scotland. Our tribe has been enemies with the Scots since forever, and I had no idea what to do. I thought if I let any of you know I was a viking, I'd be killed on the spot. Well, I guess I came close anyway."

Merida quickly looked to her bow and removed the arrow, placing it casually into her quiver.

"But everyone saw me for something I wasn't. So by you forcing this out of me, it allows you to see the true me. The me I want people to see. Not Hiccup: the Lost Boy, but Hiccup: The Viking. Because that is what I am."

Merida looked at him, studying his eyes. He seemed to want her acceptance as a viking, but a small part of her still couldn't believe it. In only a few months this boy had become her best friend, now he was the enemy. She shook her head at herself. He was no enemy. He was still the Hiccup she had learned to become friends with.

"That ye are. Yer a viking. A strange one ah'll admit, but ye still are one. Which brings us to a problem."

Hiccup's eyes widened. He was soon filled with fears that she'd once again try to shoot him, but this time she wouldn't hesitate.

"As ah said before, viking once attacked our lands causing many deaths, so mah parents might not be too happy about a viking boy, let alone the son of a viking chief sleeping in their home. So, ah'll

make ye a deal. Ah won't tell anyone about ye, if ye can forgive me fer draggin' ye out here."

Hiccup was a bit taken aback. He was expecting the worst, now it all seems too simple. Merida eyed him, seeing his hesitation. She smiled, ready to take advantage of it.

"O' course, ah could always just tie ye up now an' lead ye to th' gallows."

Now Hiccup was more confused than ever. "Wait, WHAT?" he stood up, ready to run as fast as he could, though once he was on his feet, Merida burst out laughing.

"Ah'm just kiddin' ye ninny! But ah was bein' serious about the deal. Ah promise ah won't tell a soul."

Hiccup looked into her blue eyes, never noticing before how bright they were. "Alright, sure."

She sighed, "Thank ye."

They remained just staring at each other for a few minutes, silence only being interrupted by the occasional splatters of snow falling from the overhanging tree branches. It was only until a whinny from a cold and impatient horse snapped them back into their senses and they decided to head back to the castle.

****Decision****

The kingdom of DunBroch was not the only place freezing over. Miles away the island of Berk and its inhabitants shivered under the cold clouds that poured buckets of snow and hail on their heads. One certain citizen shivered more than anyone as she was constantly watched over, the fire pit next to her blazed day and night to keep her warm. It was decided she be kept in the house of the chief since it was the warmest and there would be the least amount of activity to disrupt her. It was only when someone else came to take of her did the icy cold hit her face. Her fingers were now bandaged and placed in hot water daily so as to preserve them, though the fear of having to cut them off filled everyone's minds.

"Astrid, you feeling any better?"

Her eyes were open, though she was still very weak from her long journey. Though Phlegma, one of the women from the village, was in charge of watching her, Stoick had come from his duties to see her.

Astrid nodded her head slowly, though she durst not try and sit up. Stoick nodded to Phlegma, and she responded with another nod before leaving the small wooden house. The large man pulled a small stool next to where Astrid lay, making sure not to scrape the wood against the floor.

"I'm sorry if this is too early, but I have a few questions to ask you."

The blonde pulled her blanket up closer to her cheek before she responded. "Anything, chief."

He sighed, he knew her condition was still bad, but there was something he desperately needed to know.

"While you were out looking, where there any islands you came across that Hiccup might have landed on that Toothless perhaps just passed over?"

Astrid shook her head, "No, I don't believe so. Any island we came across was either too small for him to hide on, or Toothless would fly around making sure he wasn't even in a crack of a rock."

"And when you turned around, there was no sign of an island that he might be on?"

Once again, she shook her head. "We were in open ocean all around when I made the call."

Stoick nodded, staring at the floor in deep thought. He was back to the decision he had to make back when they first noticed Hiccup was missing. Though he knew there was only one thing he could do. He sighed again as he raised one of his large hands to his forehead, and he rubbed his temple to ease the pain.

The Hofferson girl knew he was in distress, and he knew the decision he had to make. "I'm sorry chief. We could have made it if we kept going."

The chief shook his head. "What you did was a noble thing, Astrid. We are all thankful to you for going as far as you did. We couldn't have trusted this task to anyone else."

Her blue eyes told him she thought differently, but he decided to drop the matter. He turned his thoughts again to the problem with Hiccup. They both remained in silence, as they knew the only option they now had.

Suddenly, Stoick stood up, accidentally knocking over the stool he was sitting on. To compensate for the noise, he grabbed another blanket and placed it over Astrid's body. Quickly he left the room, allowing Phlegma to go back in, then briskly walked over to Gobber's dragon dentistry shop.

"Gobber!" he called. "Gather everyone in the Great Hall! We're having a meeting."

The blacksmith looked up from his work. He was trying to floss a Monstrous Nightmare's back tooth, but the creature wouldn't stop moving. Frustrated, he gave up and let it fly away as its owner ran off after it.

"Aye? And what are we meeting about?" He said, wiping his hook.

"Just get everyone there." Stoick said as he walked by. He himself made his way to the Great Hall, closing the large doors behind him. He braced himself on a table, shaking his head. He knew what had to be done, though not only would it break his heart, it would cause chaos within the village. But it had to be done...

****Books, Books and More Books****

Hiccup yawned as he closed yet another book. Sleepily he grabbed the next book and opened it to the first page. He groaned as he continued reading, remembering the previous day when Merida mentioned something that excited him.

"Hey, Hiccup!"

"What?"

"Ah know ye mentioned yer mum was taken by some Scots."

_"Yeah, so?"

>

"Well, ah don't know if it would help or not, but we have a library on th' far side of th' castle that holds all the records of th' clans. We might find somethin' there."

_"But what if it has nothing to do with your clans?"

>

"Well, it also contains other clans we might've traded with, their attitudes, what they traded. Hiccup, we could find out who killed yer mum."

Unfortunately, she didn't mention exactly how many books and scrolls they really had. All the walls and shelves were packed high to the ceiling with military records, trade orders, laws, everything that went on in the kingdom of DunBroch. Though now he was only scanning the words on each page, he felt like he was going to throw up if he opened another book. Groaning, he looked over to Merida, who seemed very absorbed in a book about military defense. Unlike Hiccup, who had put all the books he already finished reading back on the shelf, Merida had stacks of books scattered all around her, some still open as if she never finished reading them.

Sighing, Hiccup found a loose thread off his green tunic and used it as a bookmark before closing his book and walking over to Merida. Noticing his presence, she half-closed her book with her finger still holding her place.

"What is it?"

"By the looks of it, we probably won't find anything tonight. I think it's best we call it quits for now, then just start again tomorrow."

Merida nodded, "Alright, but..." she looked back to her own book.

Hiccup gave a small chuckle. "Go ahead and finish, but you better put back all the other ones."

As soon as he finished speaking, she quickly opened her new strategy guide and fell into the book again. Sighing, Hiccup made his way back to his room where he would finish this one last book, then hopefully get some sleep. Tucking it under his arm, he looked back at Merida one last time, then closed a large, oak door behind

him.

****Declaration****

It was noisy in the Great Hall. Everyone in the village was in attendance, except for Hiccup and Astrid of course, so it was hard for Gobber to make his way through the people in order to find Stoick. With his hook still attached to his arm, he pushed people aside, sometimes accidentally scratching a few in the back or arm. If some of the villagers weren't scoffing at him or yelping in pain, they tried to direct him to where they thought Stoick might be. After a few minutes of shoving and yelling, Gobber finally managed to find the chief looking at the portrait of him and his son. Gobber didn't dare interrupt the chief from his thoughts, but the villagers were getting restless.

"Stoick..." he started, the chief only turning halfway as a response. "It's time to start."

Stoick sighed, then made his way to a large platform at the end of the Great Hall.

"Attention, everyone!" he bellowed, and the crowd turned their faces to look at their chief who had suddenly called this meeting.

"Thank you all for coming here, especially on such short notice, but I'm afraid if I don't tell you all now, I might not have the strength later..."

Some of the crowd murmured, but died once he began talking again. Stoick had never been so emotional during a speech before.

"Four months ago, my son, Hiccup, disappeared after a storm blew him and his dragon into the sea. As you all know, we sent the dragon with Astrid to find him again, but only half the party returned home. Even in her condition, Astrid Hofferson has told me there was no sign of Hiccup. There's no point in sending another search party if they already searched as much as they could, and with the winter frost this bad, we'd have to wait until spring anyway."

"But what about the six-month law?" a voice called from the back. It was followed by many nods and murmurs of agreement.

"Pipe down! The chief has a lot on his mind!" Gobber yelled over the crowd.

Stoick gulped down hard to keep away the tears he shed earlier, "I understand our law, that after six months if someone missing is not found, they-" he cut himself off. He didn't need to finish. All the other villagers knew the rest, but they remained silent out of respect.

"Though it has only been four months, I have decided to do this now, so we may use the remaining time to mourn. As Stoick the Vast, chief of Berk, I declared Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III...my son...to be dead..."

****In the Dead of Night****

Queen Elinor stood up from the table to silently stretch her neck and

shoulders. She had been pouring over letters from the clans and reading complaints from farmers and merchants from the town, all the while stressing through the bitter cold of winter. She rubbed her arm through her blue sleeve that was almost hidden by a deep purple dress that the queen only wore during the winter for its thickness and warmth.

Leaving her letters and statements on the table, she made her way upstairs to check on her husband. He said before that he was going to bed, though sometimes if he was really tired, he didn't always make it. Slowly, she opened the door to their bedroom slowly and peeked her head in. Sure enough, he was fast asleep in bed, their fireplace still blazing with heat. She smiled to see her husband so calm and vulnerable. She closed the door, then made her way back to the many letters she still had yet to respond to.

Though she stopped by the guest bedroom, as light poured out of it, and she poked her head in as she did before to see Hiccup, fast asleep on the floor next to an open book. He was curled up with the decorative furs that lined his floor, though his own fire was just about as lively as he was. Chuckling, she grabbed a blanket off his bed and wrapped it around him to keep him warm. As soon as it was around his body, he grabbed the top of it and pulled it closer to his cheek.

Smiling, she closed the door behind her and made her way again. Then she stopped and began thinking of all the other children. Pacing herself, she walked to the triplets' room, and gave a heavy sigh once she found them all sound asleep. Their mischievous little smiles were still planted on their faces as they dreamed of all their successful pranks and jokes. Elinor was smiling again, it wasn't very often you get to see the triplets sitting in one place for more than five minutes. Gently, she pecked each one of their foreheads before whispering I love you in their ears.

Briskly, she walked out to check on her firstborn. She opened the door to her daughter's room just as cautiously as she did with the others, but something was different. Merida's room was completely dark, not even a small ember remained in her fireplace. Quickly, the queen lit a small candle on Merida's desk, only to see her daughter missing from her room. She gave a small panic inside, then calmed herself down as she remembered what room she and Hiccup had declared what room in the castle they would visit that afternoon.

Taking the candle with her on a small, brass candle holder, she made her way down a couple flights of stairs and across the hall to a large room filled with books, papers and scrolls of all kinds. Sure enough, at the end of the room, Merida was curled up with a book whose pages were starting to wrinkle because of Merida's strong grasp. The queen strode along the stone floor, careful not to make as noise to disturb her daughter, then began returning the many books sprawled along the floor to their proper places on the shelves. Finally all the books were in order, and there was only one left. Carefully, she pried the book from her fingers, allowing Merida's cold hands to fall into her lap.

Turning the book over, the queen examined the cover and was surprised to see what kind of literature her daughter was reading. Merida was in the middle of reading a book about the history and laws of DunBroch. Her daughter had never taken such interest in the

diplomatic ideals of her kingdom before. Smiling, she set the book down on a stool and bent over to scoop her daughter into her arms. Merida responded by grasping her mother's gown, though her eyes remained shut.

Slowly but surely, the queen carried her daughter back to her room. She was heavier than she last remembered, but she didn't mind. As soon as they were safe behind Merida's door, Elinor took the responsibility and changed Merida's clothes so she was in her nightgown. Elinor chuckled a bit, a small stream of excitement went through her as she performed a chore she didn't have to do for years. Finally Elinor laid Merida's head down on her pillow and pulled her blankets close to Merida's many curls surrounding her face.

Leaning down, she pecked Merida's cheek whispering, "Goodnight, my wee one."

10. Chapter 10

****An Unlikely Meeting****

"So, what were all yer friends like on Berk?"

Merida and Hiccup were traveling on a familiar road through the forest, someplace they could be alone and be able to talk about Hiccup's viking life. Though they were only walking and Angus was miles away in the castle stables, Merida still shot her bow at her scattered targets she hid in the forest. Ever since she discovered he was a viking, Merida had been asking him all sorts of questions about Berk.

"Well, I don't have very many friends, but then again there aren't that many kids my age on Berk. The twins, Ruffnut and Tuffnut are the definitions of danger and disaster. Snoutlout is...well put nicely he's a hothead. Fishlegs can be shy, but he loves dragons and he keeps track of everything we do with the dragons. Astrid...well if you take the beauty of a sunrise and the ferocity of a Deadly Nadder and put them together, you'd get Astrid."

"Ah suppose her name is fittin' then."

Hiccup raised an eyebrow.

"Well, that's what her name means, right? It's Germanic for 'Divine Beauty.'" Merida said, trying to explain herself. "She must be quite popular on Berk."

"She is. And I think you'd like her. You both have a lot of the same qualities."

"How so?"

"Well, you guys are certainly no damsels in distress, you take matters in your own hands, and I'm pretty sure if I went up against you in a battle, I lose within the first five minutes."

"Heh, you'd lose within the first three."

He gave her a mocking laugh, "Thanks, I really appreciate

that."

"Well, ah suppose yer lucky ta have her then. If ah remember correctly, she's th' one who kissed ye?" Merida nudged him in the ribs with her elbow, causing him to blush and stumble a bit.

His face remained red as he mumbled and slurred through his words.
"Yeah, sowhat if she kissed me? It was a nice kiss but still... ."

Merida laughed at his shyness, seizing the opportunity to poke more fun at him. "So does that mean ah'm hearin' about a future wife of th' chief then?" she nudged him again, though this time he pushed her away to get her out of range, but Merida didn't stop laughing at him.

"Well, it doesn't matter much now. I have no way of getting home, and by the looks of things she may have to be stuck with someone else."

Merida stopped laughing. Though she loved having Hiccup here in DunBroch, he didn't belong here and he needed to get home.
"Hiccup?"

"Yeah?"

"If there's anythin' we can do ta help ye, don't be afraid ta ask."

"Thanks, Merida. But I don't know there's much of anything that anyone can do."

The just kept walking for a while, Merida still thinking of way to help Hiccup. Perhaps they could give him a boat, but he has no idea where his island is. If they sent a large crew with him, then they'd have to explain the whole situation of him being a viking, and that might not go over well. She sighed, then kicked a branch out of the path. She pulled her cloak tighter around her arms as a biting wind blew across their faces. As it died down, she heard a small sound.

"Do ye hear that?" Merida said, turning to Hiccup, who was busy brushing snow off his head that dropped on him from a towering tree.

"Hear what? The wind?"

"No, not th' wind. Listen..."

A faint, high pitched call blew through the trees from what seemed like every direction. It was minuscule, like a whisper, yet it seemed somewhat...familiar...

In a split moment, Merida knew what it was. She turned her head in every direction, trying to find the source of the noise.

"Merida, what are you doing?"

She turned to Hiccup who had a confused look planted on his face.

"Can't ye hear it?"

"Hear WHAT?"

"Shhhh!" She began looking around again, though the sound seemed to be fading. It was getting farther and farther away, but it was calling to her, coaxing her. Then a small giggle ringed in her ears and she turned to face Hiccup. Then there it was. A small, blue, translucent flame beckoning to her just a few yards away from where Hiccup was standing. Immediately she dashed off toward it, pieces of snow flying off her hair as she nearly tripped over a log with her winter boots.

Hiccup was utterly confused, and he turned to see what she was running after. But she nearly knocked him over as she tripped, and by the time he picked himself up, she was gone, and so was the object she was chasing after. Sighing, he dusted himself off, then started trekking up the hill she disappeared over. He continued walking, the snow soaking into his fur boot. Finally he made it over the hill, but Merida was nowhere to be seen. All that was there was a clearing that Hiccup had seen before.

He made his way to the middle of a ring of large stones the stood at least 20 feet high. Only one was cracked and fallen over from the time the Queen killed Mor'du. It looked much different than when he saw it earlier. Now everything was covered in ice and snow, giving an eerie mood to the whole scene. Everything seemed cold and lifeless as no amount of color showed through the landscape, except for Hiccup himself.

After a moment of taking in the scenery, Hiccup remembered why he was there, and looked around for Merida. Of course, she was nowhere to be seen. He looked around the ground to find her footprints so as to follow her, though something was off. He looked back to where he entered the ring of stones, and he saw two sets of footprints, one from him and the other from Merida. Though at the entrance of the stones, Merida's footprints disappeared. A bit bewildered, Hiccup looked up to see if it was possible for her to jump on something, but even Merida's athletic ability couldn't beat the height of the boulders.

He retraced his steps, making sure he didn't just cross paths with her, but it was all in vain. Merida seemed to have just...disappeared. Panic filled his mind as he fell into the snow, his hands trembling in fear. He knew Merida had encountered magic before as she told him, but even then he had a hard time believing in magic. _Ugh, my head hurts..._ he thought to himself as he grasped a large amount of his brown hair to ease the pain.

"Are you alright, laddie?"

Hiccup quickly turned, expecting to see Merida, but instead he saw a rather old woman with silvery hair that puffed out due to its curly texture. Her back was bent forward far, making her look as though she would fall over at any moment, and she was wrapped in a tattered, green cloak. Hiccup was surprised she wasn't freezing in such a thin covering.

"Uh, no." he said, releasing his hair. "Well, yes. But...ha-have you seen a young girl run by here recently?"

"A young girl?" she said, walking over to Hiccup. Though he thought she waddled more than walked.

Hiccup stood up, "Yeah, she's wearing a deep blue cloak; got blue eyes; bright, red, curly hair."

"Ah! you mean that lovely princess from the castle up the road?"

"Yes! Yes, her! Do you know where she went?"

"Well, I haven't seen her for a while. I was hoping she'd come back to view what I had in stock. Completely ran me out last time."

"When's the last time you saw her?"

"Oh, about a year ago."

Hiccup groaned. That was no good. Who knows what kind of trouble she's getting into, not to mention he doesn't know the way back as well as she does.

"Well, thanks anyway..." Hiccup then turned to leave the way he came. Hopefully he could just follow his footprints back and then he could tell the king his daughter is missing. He shivered at the idea as he looked for his footprints where he entered the ring of stones. _Wait...where are they?_ Hiccup looked around, but all his footprints had vanished. He looked up. The snow looked as though no one had ever been there before, but no snow was falling. In fact he swore he could even see a few holes in the clouds where he could see the sky.

He looked over to the old woman, as if she had the answers, but she just smiled at him innocently and said, "Are ye lost, laddie?"

He looked back to the ground, expecting the footprints to appear again, but they didn't. "Yeah...I think..." he responded.

"Well, would you like to come to my house for a nice, hot drink? It's been a while since I had visitors." She turned and began waddling away toward the edge of the forest.

Hiccup hesitated. Sure, a warm drink sounded nice in this weather, but Merida was still gone. He looked around, trying to find her bright, red hair against the dull snow, then started after the old woman.

He followed her deep into the forest where they zigzagged through trees and bushes that decided it would be fun to entangle themselves with Hiccup's borrowed cloak. After a few moments of wrestling with a few thorny plants, he managed to free himself and continued following the woman. Occasionally, she would look back and smile at him as if he complimented her or something, then turn back around and keep walking. This made Hiccup wonder if he really should be following her. She could be leading him into a trap, getting him off his path then robbing him or something. He eyed her physique, trying to see if her "waddling" was just an act. Though it pained him to watch her, thinking in his mind that she could really use a cane.

Eventually they made it to a small cottage. Just like everything else, it was covered in snow with icicles hanging over the door and window. Right next to it, a large amount of lumber was stacked as high as the roof. Through the window, he could see the flickering light of a fire, making him eager to enter the house. She opened the door, allowing him to enter the house first and taking in the view before she offered him a seat.

It was only one room, with a fireplace in the corner that sat next to a small stove and a sink. A rug with an colorful design that looked almost like bears dancing and playing fiddles and bagpipes. There was a small bed with many quilts and a desk lining the wall on the right of the door, and finally, near the sink there was a wooden table with a few chairs. The old woman offered him one, allowing him to sit close to the fire. Thanking her, he sat down, pulling off his cloak so all of his body could feel the radiating heat.

Soon she came over with two mugs filled with some hot liquid. Handing one to Hiccup, she sat down next to him, taking large gulps of her drink. Hiccup eyed his own mug, watching as the drink moved around the edges in his shivering hands. He took a sip, bracing himself like he did whenever he tried something new, though he relaxed as the hot liquid rolled over his tongue and seeped down his throat, warming him to the very bone.

The woman smiled, happy to see her guest so satisfied. Putting her own cup down, she finally perked up a conversation.

"So, how do you know th' wee princess of DunBroch?"

Hiccup looked at her over his cup, then finished his last gulp. "She rescued me from the water after I was cast adrift from a storm. She and her family have been taking care of me ever since. What about you?"

"Oh, she was an old patron. She bought everything I had in stock. Don't know what she did with it all, but I'm sure she put it to good use."

"What do you sell?"

"I'm a woodcarver. I sell all kinds of carvings. Furniture, trinkets, frames, everything."

Hiccup traveled through his memory, trying to identify all the carvings that were stationed in the castle. He gave up after a short while due to the many artifacts that the family of DunBroch owned.

"I'm sure you have some nice carvings then. I'd like to see some one day. Where's your store?"

The woman's eyes suddenly went wide for some odd reason, "Ah! Well, I still have to set it up. It may not be here for a while, winter issues." After she was done talking, she gave him a big smile, then quickly began drinking some more as Hiccup raised an eyebrow.

"Well, you have a nice house."

"Thank you. Though it had to go under some renovation."

"How come?"

"To be honest, I have no idea. I cam home from the Wickerman's festival in Stoneleigh one spring and it was completely demolished! Took some effort getting it back together before the ice set in."

"Okay..." he said slowly, "Well, it was nice meeting you..."

"You can just call me the Crafty Wood Carver."

"Right...but I should be going. It seems to be getting late, and I still don't know where my friend is." He stood up, wrapping his cloak around his shoulders once more.

"Oh, well alright. It was nice having you over, I hope you come back to visit."

"Yeah sure...if I can find it again..."

"What was that?"

"Nothing!" He opened the door, and stepped into the cold winds. She followed him out, guiding him and giving directions.

"If you follow those brushes, it should lead you back to the place I found you at."

"Okay. Thanks for sharing your fire with me, and your beverage. It was really nice."

"Of course, dearie. Now take care!"

He nodded and turned to keep walking, but he turned back around once he heard her door open again, and he saw her come out, close the door, snap her finger and walk back in. She did it so casually as if she did it on a regular basis, not noticing Hiccup staring at her just a few feet away. Curiosity getting the best of him, he walked back to the cottage and looked through the window. To his surprise, he could no longer see the orange, moving light of a fire, but instead it was very dark inside, making it hard for him to see anything. Confused, he opened the door without invitation and walked in.

Inside was the same size, but there were many wooden carvings of figurines and curios, many of which had a bear-like shape. Hiccup stood, eyes wide and mouth hanging open. He looked over to find the woman staring back at him, frozen in motion with her hand in the air holding a hammer while the other held a wedge in place on a rather large piece of wood.

"Oh! Hello there!" she said, pulling a fake smile. She dropped her hammer and chisel and quickly walked over to Hiccup. "Sorry, but I don't have time to talk right now. You know, it's best you forget what you saw here, now I'll be seeing you later. Ta-ta!" She started pushing him out the door as she spoke, his metal foot scraping across the floor.

"Wait...wha-?" Hiccup tried to stay inside, bracing himself between

the door posts. "Hold on! Are you a wi-"

"Yes, I'm a woodcarver. Thank you for shopping at the Crafty Carver, goodbye!"

"Just wait a second!" He pushed her back, and closed the door so she couldn't force him out. "Are you a witch?"

"No, I'm not! And I don't care if any wisps led you here, or even if Saint Nicholas led you here for me to give you a spell. Just get out now!" He began pushing him again, but this time the door opened by itself and Hiccup had to once again hold himself in by wedging himself between the door posts.

"Woah, woah, calm down. I don't want any spell!"

She stopped forcing him out and took a step back. "You don't?"

"No, why would I want a spell?" He smoothed out his clothing, trying to get out all the wrinkles the woman made while shoving him.

"Well, magic CAN be handy at times. There are spells for breathing underwater, strength of ten men, I could even do something about that leg of yours." She pointed to his left foot as the metal squeaked under his weight.

"Uh, no thanks. It's fine the way it is." He smiled a bit as he remembered his long-lost friend. "Though something I wouldn't mind would be if you could show me how I'll look in the next few years."

"What do you think I am? Some fortune teller? Besides, I am officially out of the witchcraft business, I put my cauldron to rest, and I haven't done any spells since that redhead girl."

Hiccup's eyes widened ever so slightly, "Wait, YOU'RE the witch that turned Merida's mom into a bear?"

"Hey! I didn't turn her mother into anything! She asked for the spell, I gave it to her. It was her decision to do what she pleased with it!"

"Okay, okay. Sheesh."

"But are you sure you don't want anything?"

"Now it sounds like you want me to buy a potion or something."

"Not necessarily a spell or potion, but a carving maybe because I'm a WOODCARVER and nothing else?"

"Uhhh...no?"

"Oh, well then. GET OUT!" Next thing Hiccup knew, a broom came out of nowhere and smacked him across the face after the witch snapped her finger like how she did outside. His temporary pain was eased once he came in full contact with the snow.

Groaning, he turned to complain, but once he looked up, the witch was

gone. In fact her entire house was gone. He looked around to find he was back in the ring of stones. He turned over. This was all too much for him to handle. It was enough trying to accept magic from Merida's story, but the reality of it unfolding before his eyes made him sick to the stomach. Not only that, he met a real life witch. Shoving his face in the snow, he tried to suppress the throbbing in his head.

"Hiccup?" Immediately, the boy turned over to the familiar female voice. Merida was standing in front of him holding a quizzical look on her face. "What are ye doin' down there?"

He wiped some of the melting snow off his face. "N-nothing."

"Well, get up then. It's gettin' dark an' ye know how mah mum is when we come home late." She held out her hand, pulling him off his rear.

"Right. Let's go." They started off into the forest after he brushed himself off, flakes of snow detaching from his hair and cloak. They had only began walking a few feet when he looked back, trying to remember the way to the "woodcarver's" cottage.

"Did ye lose somethin'?" He turned to see Merida's head cocked at him, and he noticed they had stopped walking.

Shaking his head, he turned forward to keep walking.

****Trips****

"So, they didn't lead you anywhere? You just kept going around in circles?"

"Aye, after a while ah just gave up, though it took some time gettin' back to where ah left ya."

Hiccup and Merida were back in the castle, once again in the library pouring over trade routes and clan history. They received a cold scolding from her mother, though it seemed mellow compared to the frosty weather outside. After she was done, they set aside their outdoor attire and went to the dining room to eat. Since everyone else had already finished dinner, they agreed to take theirs to the library, occasionally eating a few bites as they scanned through pages. Hiccup had decided not to tell Merida about the witch, since he had no idea how she'd react.

"But I thought you said the wisps were supposed to lead you to your fate."

"Well, maybe mah fate is can't be determined at this point."

"Or maybe your fate is to run around in circles through a forest for the rest of your life!" Hiccup joked. Merida threw a bone from her mutton at his face, the greasy piece of skeleton only barely missing his cheek. He returned the favor by flicking a pea at her that hit right above her eyebrow. Deciding not to start a food fight, she stuck her tongue out at him as she tried not to laugh. Chuckling, they went back to reading. They continued in silence as the fire roared next to them, though they were interrupted when a maid walked in.

"Eithne*? What are ye doin' here?"

Eithne was a small girl, probably in her early teens, younger than Hiccup and Merida. If she could be described through one word, it would be mouse. She had large, hazel eyes with moppy gray hair that fell to her mid-back. She always had a wary eye about her, and she spoke with such a soft voice.

"Pardon me, ma'am. But th' queen would like ta have a word with ye."

"About what?"

"She didn't say, ma'am."

Merida groaned, slamming her book shut and standing from her warm seat just before throwing the book on a cushion. She followed the maid, Eithne up the stone steps, leaving Hiccup alone. Though he was a bit sad she had to leave, he didn't mind the silence. He simply kept reading, searching for a new kingdom or clan that he already hadn't come across. He had been making notes on some of them, trying to narrow down his search on who killed his mother. Suddenly he stopped scribbling in his notebook. What was he going to do once or if he did find out who it was? It's not like he can just waltz up to them and take revenge. Though revenge might not even be such a good idea either. His father might disagree, but Hiccup accepted the loss of his mother, and revenge won't do anything for anyone but bring more sadness. But he did want them to know the pain they caused him. He put his head down like how he did in the snow, his forehead meeting the pages of his notebook.

Moments later, Merida came grumbling and stomping down the stair. Hiccup raised his head to see what was going on. She had a look of annoyance on her face, and he thought he heard some Gaelic curses under her breath. She stopped right in front of him, ready to rant about why she was upset, though she took one look at Hiccup's face, then suddenly burst out laughing.

Hiccup looked behind him, wondering if one of her brothers was pulling a prank on him, but no one was around. He looked back at her, but she was still dying of laughter, but she pointed at his face. He waited till she was finished, glaring at her the whole time hoping she would explain. Finally, she calmed down, sitting herself on the cold floor.

"Ye've got a little somethin' on yer crown." She gritted her teeth to keep from laughing, and Hiccup wiped his forehead and looked at his sleeve to see what had caused so much amusement. He rolled his eyes when he saw a black smudge cover his sleeve. The charcoal from his notebook must have rubbed off when he put his head down. He tried rubbing the rest off, but unfortunately he had no mirror.

"Here, ah'll get it, ye lamb." Merida scooted closer to him, then used the hem of her dress to clean off the remaining charcoal. After she finished, she nodded her head in satisfaction.

"Right, now what was THAT all about?" Hiccup said, gesturing to the library door.

Merida's face fell. Her smile turned to a grimace, and she pulled her knees to her chest. "Mah mum decided ta tell me TODAY that we were leavin' fer th' home of Lord MacGuffin TOMORROW."

"How come?"

"Ah don't know! She probably still wants me ta choose a suitor fer marriage!"

"And she wants it to be the son of Lord MacGuffin?"

"Actually, in mah opinion, Cathal** is th' best choice out o' th' three."

"Cathal?"

"Th' first born son of Lord MacGuffin. He's not bad compared ta th' other two. He's definitely stronger, he's just shy ah guess."

"Well, if he's the perfect choice, why don't you just go ahead marry him then?" Hiccup nudged her leg playfully, but she slapped his hand away.

"Ah said he was th' better choice. Not th' perfect choice. And as far as ah stand, ah still won't marry ANY o' them."

Hiccup raised his hands in defeat. "Okay, okay. But if you already know your mom's motives, why would she wait till now to tell you?"

"Eh, probably so ah couldn't talk her out of it. Ah managed ta get out of meetin' with th' Dingwalls this past summer."

"How?"

"It was durin' th' rainy season, so ah went out ridin' every day an' eventually caught a minor cold. Not bad enough ta be bedridden, but enough ta fake it through."

"Wow, you would risk your own health and safety just to get out of things?"

"Ah wouldn't say ta get out o' things, just preserve mah freedom fer a little longer. Lord knows when ah won't have it anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, ah won't be able to avoid marriage fer mah entire life. Even though ah wouldn't mind it, ah still have duties ta attend to. Ah'm next in line fer th' throne, an' this kingdom will need a new king eventually." Merida sighed. She obviously still didn't like the prospect of marriage, but at least she's accepting it now. Suddenly he eyes lit up.

"Oy! Why don't ye come with us?"

"What?"

"Ta see Lord Macguffin tomorrow! It would make the trip a lot less irritatin'."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well...I don't know. I just get the feeling I'd just get in the way."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on, Hiccup. Yer much more useful than ye make yerself out ta be." Giving him a reassuring smile, she stood up and patted his head before walking out the door. As she made her way up the stairs, she called out to him, "Ah'm goin' ta bed. You should to, 'cause yer goin' whether ye like it or not!"

* * *

><p>*Scottish name meaning "kernel or grain"<p>

**Scottish name meaning "battle mighty"

11. Chapter 11

On the Way

Hiccup shifted in his seat, trying to get in a comfortable position, but no matter what he tried his backside was still sore. The king and queen agreed to let Hiccup join them in their visit to the clan of MacGuffin since he was their guest, but Hiccup felt that maybe he should have stayed back in DunBroch. They had been riding for hours through the forest and Hiccup's entire lower body was screaming at him in pain. Riding a horse was way different than riding a dragon.

He patted his horse's neck to show he at least appreciated it, but then returned to grimacing. It was bad enough riding behind Merida on Angus, but riding on his own was much worse. The horse underneath him was much different than Angus. He had a brown coat, and his head and legs were much more slender. He recalled Merida calling him a "Eriskay Pony" and that his name was "Eacharn*." He looked over to see the other family members, each of the twins in another family member's lap, probably not trusted enough to ride on their own. Everyone else had a Clydesdale like Angus, though the one Queen Elinor rode had a white coat and mane, giving the matriarch an even more regal look, if that was even possible. King Fergus' steed was brown, like Eacharn, though it had blotches of white all over it.

Hiccup jumped in his seat a little when Eacharn gave a small snort. He didn't know what it meant, so he patted his neck again. With Toothless, if they were flying and he made a noise like that, it meant he was hungry. Hiccup must have been hungry too because at that moment, his stomach decided to give a loud growl.

Fergus must have heard it when he chuckled and announced to everyone, "Alright, let's find a good spot and stop for lunch!"

Not long after, they came to a small clearing in the trees. As soon as they stopped, Hiccup got off his horse, relieved to be able to stand again. Only the triplets got off the horses as fast as Hiccup

did, but they decided to run around a bit before the food was ready. Merida laid down a large blanket on the snow as Elinor set out some of the food they brought with them. They had decided not to bring any servants with them since this would be an informal trip, and the family liked their moments alone.

"Hiccup, aren't ye goin' ta sit down?" Merida asked, her father was already eating and the triplets started as well.

He hesitated for a moment, then leaned down to sit. He nearly fell over trying to induce the least amount of pain, but eventually situated himself next to Merida. They ate in silence for a while, save the sounds of the wind whistling through the trees, and the laughter and giggling of the triplets.

"Soooo...how much farther do we have to go?" said Hiccup after he had his fill.

"Oh, we're only about halfway there." King Fergus said between bites.

The viking gave a silent groan. He didn't want to ride the horse anymore. He thought of asking if he could just walk instead, but deciding it would be rude, he waved the thought away.

Hiccup waited for Merida to finish eating, then she gestured to him so they could go on their own for a while. With a sigh of relief, he stood up as Merida grabbed her bow.

"Ah! Where are you going?" Elinor called, stopping the pair in their tracks.

"Just ta explore fer a bit. We won't go far."

"Oh no, young lassie. You are going to sit down, and we are going to go over some rules."

"Mum!" Merida plopped herself down again, forcing Hiccup to do the same since he had nothing better to do.

"Now listen. I understand our little quarrel was resolved a while ago, but you still need to act like a lady around the Lord and his family. And that means, no weapons for starters!" Elinor held out her hand at her last statement, demanding the bow Merida was clutching.

"What? No!" Merida raised it to her chest protectively. "Ye can't do that!"

"Merida, this is not a discussion. Give it to me."

The princess groaned, then handed her bow and quiver over to her mother, who gave it to Fergus to take care of.

"Now the second matter, you are not to make fun of ANY of the Lord's children, and ABSOLUTELY no setting any of them on fire!"

"Oh, come on, mum. Ah wouldn't do that ta any of Lord MACGUFFIN'S children."

"Woah, woah. Wait. You set someone on FIRE?" Hiccup interrupted.

"Aye. Guaire**, the son of Lord Macintosh. But he deserved it."

"Merida, no one deserves to get a torch thrown in their face." Elinor glared at her daughter for such rude manners.

"Well, ah'd say a couple burnt eyebrows was an improvement fer his _wee pretty face_!"

"MERIDA!"

Merida quickly shut her mouth after her mother shouted, but her eyes burned at the ground. "Sorry, mum."

"Now then. I would also like you to practice your etiquette while we visit Lord MacGuffin. You'll be in unfamiliar circumstances, and you need to know how to act in certain situations. For instance, not stuffing your gob."

Merida froze as she took a large bite of a red apple she pulled from her bag. Sighing, she took out a knife and cut it into slices. Elinor nodded in acceptance, then continued.

"Now, I won't make you wear anything too formal this time, but I trust you enough to at least present yourself the way you're supposed to."

"Thank ye. Is that all?"

"Aye. After your father is done eating his fill, we better get going so we can make it before dusk."

****Arrivals****

Lord MacGuffin paced around with a stern look. His eyes were hidden under his eyebrows as they usually were, but his blonde mustache and beard accented his frown that moved as he mumbled. His family was with him, as well as his wife who was watching him with a worried look on her face.

Lord and Lady MacGuffin had four children. Three older boys, the eldest being Cathal, and one daughter who had just turned twelve. Like Queen Elinor, Lady MacGuffin prefers to teach her daughter in the ways of a noblewoman so as to prepare her for marriage, though unlike Merida, Sorcha*** wasn't as outspoken and she accepted her mother's instruction. At the moment, she was practicing her calligraphy while her brothers, Brian**** and CatanÂ° played with their Scottish Deerhound. Brian was only a year younger than Cathal, and he looked up to him as an idol. He admired his brother's natural strength and worked hard to be just like him. Catan wasn't as strong as his elder brothers, but he was quite fast in all aspects. He had a quick tongue, sometimes a bit too quick, and oh how he loved to run. He ran so fast he challenged horses to races, though they'd outrun him within a few seconds. Cathal looked out the window from the small room their family was in, a worried look also on his face. Occasionally he would exchange glances with his mother, half-worried for his father, half-worried for their guests who were supposed to

have arrived the previous day.

Suddenly the door opened, startling everyone in the room.

"Sir, their Majesties have arrived." said the servant that broke the silence. He gave a small bow before leaving, though he left the door open as the entire family and the dog jumped up and ran out of the room.

Catan was the first to see the new arrivals, running ahead of everyone and stopping right before colliding with one of them.

"Awrite!" he said loudly in front of Merida.

"Oh, hello Catan!" she replied, dusting the snow off her cloak and pulling her hood from her hair.

"Fergus!" Lord MacGuffin boomed as he walked over, his arms outstretched.

"Macrath!!" they entered into a large bear hug, "Sorry we were so late, friend. Got caught in a blizzard."

"Are ye alright?"

"Aye, now that we're here."

By now the entire family had arrived and was waiting to greet the royals.

"May I present my family," said Lord MacGuffin, "my wife, Muireall; my sons: Brian, Catan, and Cathal, you know; and my daughter, Sorchu. Everyone this is Bear King, Fergus; Lady Queen, Elinor; Princes Hamish, Hubert, Harris; and Princess Merida."

They all bowed and the ladies curtsied, but a voice interrupted the formalities.

"Oh, an' ah hope ye don't mind, but we brought one more." piped Merida. She stepped aside to show the scrawny, brown-haired boy who was actually trying to hide himself behind her. "This is Hiccup, my friend."

Hiccup gave a small smile, then bowed to the family as previously instructed by Merida.

"Ah, of course! The more the merrier!" chuckled the Lord as he nodded his head to the boy. "Now, then. Ah'm sure you're all tired an' hungry, so why don't we go to the dining hall to eat, then ye can rest up for tomorrow!"

They proceeded to a large room, much like the dinning room at the castle of DunBroch, though the room was a bit smaller, and pictures and paintings lined the walls as a lone fireplace in the corner gave the only light and heat beside the candles set up on the table. Many platters of food also lined the long, wooden table, and soon the room was filled with conversation and laughter.

Merida had seated herself between Cathal and her brothers to keep an

eye on them, Hiccup sitting across from her between Brian and Catan. Fergus and Macrath had taken the ends of the table, their wives sitting across from one another while they carried a casual conversation about the kingdom and their daughters.

During the first introductions, Hiccup was very nervous about this new family. Though as he talked with Catan and Brian, he relaxed more and more till he too was bursting with laughter. Brian wasn't far from his own age, though with the way he treated Hiccup, he must have thought he was much younger, especially since he valued strength and couldn't help but notice the skin and bones Hiccup was made out of. Though, Catan did most of the talking in the group, telling Hiccup all about how fast he was and what the family was like. Sometimes Hiccup could barely understand him.

"Like Cathal, Sorchas kind quiet. Though she talks occasionally. Mum hopes she'll marry some wealthy bachelor someday, though ah dunno how that's gonna work out. Ah really like yer fake foot. It has a weird shape. How did ye lose yer leg? Sorchas makes weird stuff too. She likes to make stuff outa mud an' clay. Though nothin' like that. Did ye make it yerself? Hey, Sorchas! Take a look at his leg!"

Hiccup leaned over to get a better look at the daughter, though once he caught her eye, her cheeks went beet red and she turned to her mother, pulling her blonde locks to the side of her face so no one could see her. Shrugging, Hiccup turned back to eat and listen to Catan's continuous talking.

The night droned on, but as soon as one person gave a small yawn, they all decided it was time to go to bed. Soon they were all stumbling over the stairs, the last few laughs escaping their mouths. The DunBroch family crawled their way to a large guest bedroom prepared for them, inside there were two large beds, one for Fergus and Elinor, the other for the triplets and one smaller cot for Merida.

A bit dizzy, Merida turned to the Lord. "Where is Hiccup gonna sleep?"

"Oh, sorry bout that. We didn't know he was comin'."

Hiccup gave a sheepish look. "Sorry."

"Don't worry, lad. Cathal has an extra cot in his room. Ye can sleep there if ye want."

"Thank you." Hiccup followed Cathal down the hallway and into a small bedroom where Hiccup found a large bed, a small cot in the corner as the Lord said, though the place was littered with weights, furs, and to Hiccup's surprise, a large amount of paintings.

"Here." said Cathal quietly, handing a blanket to Hiccup.

"Thanks." he said, taking it in his arms and making his way to the cot. It was bigger than him, though it was probably built for something larger in stature than him. Wrapping himself in the blanket he rolled onto the cot. He heard a rustling behind him indicating Cathal had gone to bed as well.

For a while, there was nothing but the crackling of a fire next to

Cathal's bed. Then...silence.

****Return to Darkness****

As usual, there was a nightmare. Hiccup seemed almost used to it now. He even seemed aware of it while dreaming. He looked around, seeing a familiar town, familiar people, familiar animals. Berk. His home. He looked up. There was Toothless, flying high above his head. His bright red prosthetic tail glistening in the hot sun. He called out to him, but he just kept flying away. Soon he was nothing but a shadow on the horizon. He looked around again. Berk was no longer there. It flew away with Toothless, now taunting him on the water's edge. He reached out for it, a tear falling down his cheek, but it just disappeared off the edge of the Earth. He turned to find what else from his past could taunt him, but all he saw was Merida.

She was smiling at him, her beautiful smile pulling him out of the water where he stood. But once he was on land her smile faded. Tears welled in her eyes, and she began crying. Hiccup didn't understand. Why was she crying? Then she was being pulled away from him, no. She was falling into a pit of flames. She cried out to him, but he couldn't reach her. "No!" he cursed.

"MERIDA!" he gasped. Hiccup panted hard, back in Scotland.

Cathal grunted, and rolled in his sleep, apparently not too disturbed by Hiccup's sudden awakening. Running a hand through his hair, he took some deep breaths, then laid back down on the cot. For a few moments he closed his eyes, though he couldn't sleep again after that.

****A Day With MacGuffin****

Hiccup could tell where the MacGuffins lived was very different than the DunBrochs. There weren't a many trees, which was probably the reason why the wind felt harsher in the blizzard from the previous day as they got closer to their destination. The land of MacGuffin consisted mostly of clear plains, a frozen river flowing down from a distant mountain far in the distant morning fog. The town of the clan was much smaller than DunBroch, but the people were still just as polite. As the two families and the straggler moved through the town, there were all sorts of greetings and gestures.

Lord MacGuffin had decided to take everyone ice fishing in a lake on the other side of the plains that the family had been going to even before Macrath had become a Lord. Hiccup was thankful they weren't riding horses again, though the triplets had decided it would be fun to ride on the MacGuffins' Scottish Deerhound around in the snow as they ventured. They talked as they did the night before, sharing stories and events as they walked, Hiccup learning more and more about the different clans.

Based on Brian and Catan's descriptions, the other two clans are nothing compared to them. The Macintosh clan apparently had no idea how to fight, and Clan Dingwall was just full of idiots. From this Hiccup could conclude one thing: The MacGuffins took a lot of pride in their clan.

Though amiss all the laughter and talking, Hiccup couldn't help but notice one member of their party was silent. His roommate, Cathal

MacGuffin was constantly looking at the ground, watching flakes of snow fly as he kicked them. Hiccup was about to go over and talk to him, but Brian and Catan kept pestering him with questions and facts. Before he knew it, they were at their destination.

Hiccup looked around. This lake truly was in the middle of nowhere. He couldn't even find the town they left behind so long ago even though there were very few trees and the winter weather had taken away all the leaves anyway. The lake was frozen solid, at least until some of the MacGuffin boys started chiseling into the ice so they could start fishing. They decided to only do three holes for time sake, and soon they were split off in different corners of the lake. Fergus and Macrath had gone to one hole, gesturing to their wives who decided it was too dangerous and forbade the youngest from going out onto the lake. Brian and Catan took another hole, leaving Merida, Cathal and Hiccup at the last one.

Merida was excited at first, though soon she became very bored. She had never gone ice fishing before, and now she sees why. She always took her bow to the river to fish where they were clearly visible and she could just shoot it, but this time she had to use a rod, and wait for the fish to come to her. To make matters worse, neither Hiccup nor Cathal seemed very talkative. Sighing, Merida took off her gloves and started rubbing her hands together. Though she regretted it since the wind suddenly picked up and it bit her fingers as it passed. Frustrated, she put her gloves back on and eyed her companions.

"So," she started, "How have ye been, Cathal?"

He shrugged. "Alright, ah suppose." he said slowly.

She gave him a smile. Ever since the battle of the suitors, Cathal had been trying to change his dialect around the other clans so he could speak to them easier. Though she felt a bit sorry for him. He had to try to change a part of who he was, like how Merida's mother tried to change who she was.

Unfortunately, Cathal didn't seem to want to carry the conversation anymore, so Merida turned her attention to Hiccup.

"How do ye like th' plains, Hiccup?"

"Nice. It actually kind of reminds me of home." He looked around him, imagining large, wooden houses and dragons flying about.

"Where do ye live, Hiccup?" Cathal questioned.

Both Hiccup and Merida's eyes widened and they looked at each other, unsure of what to say.

"I, uh...I live in, uh-"

"Hiccup lives up North in Iceland."

Merida and the viking exchanged looks, then Hiccup nodded to the Lord's son.

"Yeah, I was traveling South to visit some family, but we got caught in a storm and I washed up on Merida's shores."

Cathal raised his eyebrows. "Really? You survived a storm? How did you manage?"

"Well, I was unconscious most of the time, but I was *cough* thrown overboard and I haven't seen my family since."

"Do you know where they are? We could probably take you to them."

"Oh, well...to be honest, I have no idea. But thank you for the offer."

Cathal nodded to him, then he focused on his fishing pole again.

Merida sighed. Silence had overtaken them again and now it seemed talking was too risky for Hiccup. Out of boredom, she began humming a familiar tune, one she sang often, but mostly just with her mother. It sounded like a lullaby, especially since Merida closed her eyes as she hummed. She swayed back and forth to the slow, steady beat, but she stopped altogether when she opened her eyes to see Hiccup and Cathal staring at her, mouths slightly agape.

"What?" her face turned sour.

Cathal shrugged his shoulders. "It sounds nice."

"Thanks."

"What's it called?"

"Ah'm not to sure. Mah mum an' ah used ta sing it together when ah was a wee lass."

"What are th' words?"

Merida's eyes widened for a second. "Well, brace yer ears, lads. Ah'm not much of a singer." She coughed, clearing her throat. The boys scooted closer to hear her voice clearly before she began.

"A naoidhean bhig, cluinn mo ghuth

Mise ri d' thaobh, O mhaighdean bhan-"

"I remember this song!"

Cathal and Merida turned toward Hiccup who had so rudely interrupted her song. Realizing his mistake, he tried to explain himself.

"Well, i-it's just that I remember you-uh...*ahem* singing that song when we first met." he stuttered.

"What? No ah wasn't."

"Yeah. I'm guessing your mom had you sing it to 'sustain your voice better' or something like that."

Merida stared at him for a moment, views and thoughts of lessons and practices moving past her eyes. "Oh, ah remember now. I was thinking

of when ah pulled ye out o' th' water. Ah forgot ye were unconscious till later."

"Yeah...sorry for interrupting. Please continue."

Merida scrunched up her face. She didn't feel too pleased to start all over, but it couldn't be helped.

"A naoidhean bhig, cluinn mo ghuth
>Mise ri d' thaobh, O mhaighdean bhan
Ar righinn oig, fas as faic
>Do thir, dileas fhein
A ghrian a's a ghealaich, stuir sinn
>Gu uair ar cliu 's ar gloire
Naoidhean bhig, ar righinn og
>Mhaighdean uashaill bhan"<p>

The young men clapped after she had finished as she gave them each a small bow as she sat.

"That was beautiful." commented Cathal, still clapping.

"Yeah, it was great." said Hiccup, "But what does it mean?"

"Now ah have ta translate fer ye?" Merida rolled her eyes, but she started once Hiccup shrugged his shoulders.

She gave a heavy sigh, "Little baby, hear my voice

I'm beside you, O maiden fair
>Our young Lady, grow and see
Your land, your own faithful land
>Sun and moon, guide us
To the hour of our glory and honor
>Little baby, our young Lady
Noble maiden fair"

"Wow, so your mom sang that to you?"

"Ah suppose so. Ah mostly just heard it as she sang it everywhere. She sang ta get me ta sleep, around th' castle, when ah was scared. She probably sang it 'cause she wanted me ta grow up ta be a good queen or whatever."

"I'd imagine so." Hiccup smiled at her.

She chuckled at him, though they all shivered when the wind blew into their faces again. Groaning, she stood up and stretched her muscles. She felt too cold just sitting there, and it didn't seem like they were catching anything anyway. Then she looked over the wide ice, and a small grin couldn't help but creep onto her face.

Suddenly she started off in a run, and everyone looked up to see what on Earth she was doing, then she stopped moving her feet and she slid across the lake's smooth surface. She did this over and over, finding joy and thrill as her hair flowed behind her. Every time she gained more speed and her laughter increased.

"C'mon!" she called to Hiccup and Cathal, though Cathal just looked around, hiding his interest, and Hiccup pointed to his leg.

"Can't skate with this!"

She rolled her eyes then kept going. At least she could keep herself entertained. She tried spinning across the ice, sliding on her knees, doing anything to get her heart pumping faster. Her brothers wanted to join the excitement, but the queen grabbed each one of them.

"Oh, no you don't! It's too dangerous, Merida shouldn't even be doing that. Merida!" she called, "Merida, get away from the center of the lake, it's not safe!"

"Aw, mum! It's perfectly fi-"

CRACK!

Merida froze where she stood. She didn't dare look down, but she could tell from the looks of everyone else's faces her fears were true. Slowly, she tilted her head forward and looked down. Just below her feet was a clean, white cuts in the ice.

"Everyone off the ice!" Fergus shouted as he stumbled backward, though Merida held her breath as she kept still. They all ran to the edge of the lake where Merida was closest, shouting and calling out to her.

"Merida! Don't move!"

"Oh my Lords, is she goin' ta fall in?"

"It's goin' ta be alright, lass!"

"Merida, see if you can inch your way to the edge!"

She stood with her blue eyes staring at all of them. None of them had ever seen so much fear in her before. She decided to heed the last call and she lifted one foot to take a step. Gently, she put it down only a few inches farther than her other foot, but once she did another resounding _crack_ echoed through the tundra. She quickly replaced her foot to its original position. The cracks in the ice looked like spiderwebs, only these ones held a little more potential for death.

"Ah can't move!" she cried. Her breaths shortened and her body shook rapidly.

"Ah'll come ta get ye, Merida!" her father called. He just stepped onto the ice when someone pulled him back.

"Wait!" Hiccup had grabbed his coat, "All you'll do is add more weight. We need a plan."

"We NEED ta get mah daughter off th' ice!" Fergus pulled his coat away from him.

"Yes, but we need to do it in a way where she'll still be alive when we do!"

The king stopped in his steps, looking at his daughter. He turned back to Hiccup, seeing the determination and fear in his own eyes. Reluctantly, he got off the lake.

"Alright, lad. What would ye suggest we do?"

In a flash, Hiccup ran to their bag of supplies and took out a long string of rope.

"Okay," he said, "We need someone to tie themselves to this and take it out to Merida so IF the ice breaks, everyone else can just pull them out quickly."

"Alright, who's going out then?"

They all looked among themselves, but it was obvious who it should be. All their eyes were directed at Hiccup, who drew in a small breath when he met their eyes. True, he was the lightest of those who were able to get her, but even he had a fear of the danger. But then again, there wasn't much choice. Quickly, he tied one end of the rope to his waist, and everyone else minus the wives and Sorchia assembled themselves grabbing hold of the other end.

"Alright, Merida. I'm coming!" Hiccup called, and he sucked in a deep breath. Cautiously, he stepped out onto the ice and slid his boot across its smooth surface. His prosthetic tapped against the frozen water, and the sound of it scraping against it hurt everyone's ears, though not as much as the continuous cracking noise. Soon he was making his way to her.

"Hiccup," Merida said, watching the splinters spread, "Ah'm scared."

The viking was only halfway to her, but he held out his hand to reassure her.

"I know. But don't worry, don't look down. Just look at me." Her eyes slowly lifted to see his. Once she caught hold of his green eyes, she couldn't look away. "There, now. Y-you're gonna be...just fine."

"No ah'm not!" her eyes squinted a little as she fought hard to hold back tears.

As he made his way closer to her, the noise increased.

"Hey, would I ever lie to you?"

"Yes, ye've lied ta me before!"

He gave a weak chuckle, "Yeah, well not-not this time. I promise you, Merida. Everything will be alright." He was just an arms length away now. "You have to believe in me."

A warm tear fell, and Merida nodded, never leaving his gaze. For a moment it seemed like they were the only two people in the world.

"Good." Hiccup said, then he picked up the slack on his rope and slowly raised his arms to wrap it around her. She grabbed onto his shirt to steady them both as he kept wrapping it around her. Once he finished he looked out to the others and nodded. They all responded with nods and the two made their way back. At the first steps the cracking became deeper and Merida tightened her grip on Hiccup, though as they got closer and closer to the shore the sounds died

away, but Merida still didn't relax. Soon, everyone was breathing almost normally as they were almost there, but-

CRASH!

The ice gave way under Hiccup and Merida, though they were lucky enough to be in the middle of a large piece of ice. Unfortunately it couldn't hold their weight and the water was soon rushing at their feet. Merida screamed at it began to seep at her leather boots, and Hiccup realized there was only one thing left to do.

"Merida, we have to get off!"

But the princess' knees shook at the sight of the water, and she only grabbed at Hiccup's shirt more. Hiccup looked to the rest of them, but there wasn't much else they could do. If they pulled the rope, it would only drag them into the water.

With a determined look suddenly overcoming him, he scooped up the redhead in his arms and with great effort leaped as far as he could. Thankfully, all the others knew what to do and they pulled the rope as hard as they could while they were still in the air to get them as close to the edge before they crashed onto the ice. Hiccup scrambled up and dragged Merida onto the snow before collapsing next to her.

All his adrenaline was gone, and Merida was safe. That's all that mattered.

* * *

<p>*Scottish name meaning "horse lord"<p>

**Scottish name meaning "proud; noble"

***Scottish name meaning "brightness; light"

****Scottish name meaning "strength"

Â°Scottish name meaning "small cat"

Â°Â°Scottish name meaning "son of prosperity"

Â°Â°Â°Scottish name meaning "sea-bright"

12. Chapter 12

Gifts and Confusion

There it was again. Another flash of Toothless ran through Hiccup's mind and the black dragon just circled around the boy, spinning faster and faster. His wings were spread far so one just barely grazed Hiccup's arms as it moved. Hiccup didn't bother looking around. He didn't want to see everything that was lost to him. Gradually, Toothless slowed down and finally stopped flying to stand in front of him. Hiccup closed his eyes, not wanting to look at his friend. The dragon growled at him, but he didn't flinch at the sudden hostility. The growl was low and harsh as it rumbled through the empty space that enveloped Hiccup. Unexpectedly, a voice emerged from

the growl, but it was just as heavy.

"Look at me..." it said.

Though Hiccup continued to look into the darkness behind his eyelids. The growling became louder.

"Have you already forgotten my face?"

Hiccup shook his head slowly.

"Do you still care for me?"

He nodded this time, but a small tear leaked past his cheek and chin and onto the ground.

"Then look at me."

Hiccup still didn't look up, and he could hear the sound of a dragon flapping its wings. Giving up, he opened his eyes, but Toothless was gone.

Everything was gone. Hiccup now lay staring at a ceiling, a heavy weight pushing down on his entire body with the cold night nipping at his tear-stained cheeks. He just laid there at the thoughts and images from his dream slowly melted away, till all he could remember was a blur, and a voice. He sighed, as he tried to think on where he was...and why it was so hot. Groaning, he tried to sit up, but he only made it a few inches above the mattress before falling back down. Looking down, he saw a massive amount of sheets and blankets wrapped around him tightly. He gave another sigh before he began pushing and kicking the many layers off. He slightly regretted it when a sudden burst of cold air hit his body. Grabbing the top blanket, he wrapped it around himself, then set his foot on the floor to get out of the room. He had no idea why since he remembered where he was now. He was in the house of MacGuffin, Cathal's room to be exact.

With great effort, he pushed himself up only to fall over. He grabbed the bed post closest to him to steady himself, then he looked around for his prosthetic. Cursing under his breath, he grabbed his half-wooden, half-metal leg and sat down on the bed to attach it to his stump. After it was secure, he got up again and made his way to the door.

"Where are ye goin'?" a voice said slowly behind him.

Turning, Hiccup saw Cathal at the end of the room, sitting up on the cot Hiccup had slept on nights before.

Hiccup ran through his head trying to come up with some sort of excuse, "How's Merida doing?"

"Alright, surprisingly."

"Surprisingly?" Hiccup cocked his head as he made his way back to the bed.

Cathal shrugged his shoulders. "Ah've never seen her so scared before than when she was on th' ice. Ah thought she'd be a bit shaken when

she woke up, but a couple hours ago she came in ta check on ye, but practically skipped away when she heard ye were doin' fine."

Hiccup raised an eyebrow to Cathal, but the Lord's son just shrugged his shoulders again, showing he knew nothing. They sat there in silence for a few moments as Hiccup thought of possible motives for Merida's actions. Cathal just sat there, looking at Hiccup with curiosity.

"What's 'toothless?'" he said suddenly.

Hiccup almost jumped when he heard the name out loud.

"What?"

"'Toothless.' You kept mumbling it over and over in your sleep."

"Oh. It's...nothing." he looked down.

"Is it a name?"

Hiccup nodded his head, still looking at and tracing the patterns on the quilt he was now sitting on. "It was the name of a friend back home."

"You Icelanders have strange names."

Hiccup gave him a quizzical look, then remembered that he and Merida had to lie to him about where he was from. "Oh! Yeah. Well, it's not like we can choose them or anything. Our parents choose them for us."

"True."

Yet another awkward silence overcame them and the two of them just sat there looking around at the room. Curiosity overcame the viking as he picked up a small canvas lying on the floor next to the bed and stared at it.

"Did you paint this?" he said, looking deep into the picture. It was hard to see it in the dark, but he could make out a portrait of someone. It was a girl, but she wasn't finished.

"Oh!" Cathal hadn't realized what Hiccup was looking at, and he quickly ran over and yanked the canvas out of his hands. "This isn't finished yet!"

"Well, are there any that are?" Hiccup had now become interested in this newly found talent.

Cathal blushed, then nodded his head, but didn't move. It wasn't until Hiccup had raised an eyebrow, expecting to see some of his work that he put down the painting he was holding and picked up another one from across the room. Once it was in his hands, Hiccup turned his hands and the painting to get the best look at it from the small light that came from the moon out of the window. It was a picture of another girl, though he could see she had jet black hair while wearing a dark dress, but she had very light skin and bright, red lips.

"Wow, it's beautiful." said Hiccup, still scanning the painting. "Who is she?"

Cathal shrugged his shoulders. "Just someone who passed by mah window."

Hiccup picked up another one. This time it was a large man who seemed to be having trouble keeping hair on his head, but not on his chin. He kept looking through more and more, seeing faces fly past his eyes. Some were old, some were young. Some had red hair, others blonde.

"How can you get so many people to pose for you?"

"Ah don't."

Hiccup looked up from the gallery and cocked his head.

Cathal sighed, "Sometimes people pass by me, and ah just feel a sudden desire ta paint. Ah try ta memorize their face an' come back here ta put it on a canvas."

"Wow. So you can look at anyone and just paint them?"

He blushed again. "W-well...ah guess."

"That's amazing. You really have a gift."

"Thanks..." Quickly, Cathal gathered up the canvases and set them aside in a corner.

"So how many people have you done?"

"Ah don't know. A lot. Mostly everyone from our town, couple from DunBroch from a while ago, a few Macintoshes, but ah think ah've only done one from Dingwall."

"Have you done anything else? Like animals or plants?"

His face scrunched up, "Actually, no. Mostly just people."

"Really? How come?"

He shrugged his shoulders before sitting back down on the cot. "Ah just prefer paintin' people."

Hiccup shrugged as well, showing he understood, then laid back down on the bed as Cathal curled up in a blanket. They just laid there for a few minutes in silence, Hiccup's eyelids slowly growing heavier and heavier as the weight of the night pulled him into sleep, but he jolted when Cathal's voice pulled him back.

"Hiccup?"

He sighed. "Yeah?"

"Do ye like Merida?"

Hiccup sat up straight and just stared at Cathal, a puzzled look frozen on his face. "Why do you ask?"

He shrugged his large shoulders, the blanket moving as he did. "Toothless" wasn't th' only thing ye were mumblin' in yer sleep."

Hiccup didn't answer his question. He fell back onto his pillow, his eyes wide. To be honest, he didn't really know the answer himself. Sure, he liked her, but she was just a friend, plus he was in love with Astrid...but Astrid was gone with Berk...but could he really betray her? He grabbed his hair in frustration.

There was no falling asleep after this.

****Fears****

What are dreams? Are they reels of images of a subconscious thought? Are they visions of the past or future? What is their purpose? Merida didn't know, and frankly, she didn't care. All she knew was they haunted her. On one particular night, she tossed and turned as images and sounds roared through her brain.

She was lying on the ground, her eyes looking up to the sky which moved faster than she could process, turning from day to night and back again. Her hair was sprawled on the ground as much as she was, a gentle weight pushing her down. Above her she could see something flying about above her head, but she couldn't make out what it was. It looked like a large bird, just going past the sky every now and then. She reached out to it, but it was gone. Then she could hear the ocean waves as they licked her heels, and the weight on her got heavier and heavier to the point where she couldn't even move. The salt water continued to lap around her legs before it reached her torso and neck, then completely enveloped her. But it didn't feel like she was in the ocean. It was hot...like fire...Fire and pressure that curled her into a ball before encompassing her in a cage of steel. She wanted to break away, get free from it, but it was unbreakable. Suddenly, she saw her mother's face in front of her, then it changed to the Demon Bear Mor'du. Screaming, she let out a breath only to gasp reality back into her life.

Her heart was thumping fast, though her blue eyes opened slowly as she woke up. Though she was given a rather rude awakening when she saw six eyes peering at her over her face. She took in a gasp as Hamish, Hubert and Harris leaped off her cot, laughing.

"Get back her ye wee devils!" she called after them, jumping up and chasing them out of the room.

The King and Queen must have been up for a while since neither of them were in sight as the princess chased her brothers through the hallways. Occasionally they ran into a maid or servant as they went at a high speed, but somehow Merida managed to keep up with her mischievous brothers since they didn't know the house of MacGuffin that well.

Then out of nowhere, Hiccup and Cathal came around a corner and collided with the triplets.

"Boys!" Merida scolded through her huffs and puffs, "Get up an' apologize!"

They all mumbled some inaudible words as they scrambled on the floor, trying to get up.

"Good. Now go an' find mum. Ah'm done playin' fer now."

They ran off opposite the direction they came, giggling and whispering about their next scheme. Catching her breath, she pulled Hiccup and Cathal off the floor by their arms.

"Sorry 'bout that, laddies. Mah family can get a bit out of hand sometimes."

They nodded in forgiveness, as they dusted off their clothes.

"Well, see ye boys later!" she chirped, and skipped off to get some breakfast.

Both Hiccup and Cathal watched as she went down the hallway, her red curls bouncing up and down with each step.

"You were right." Hiccup said, turning toward Cathal after she was out of sight. "She is acting quite strange."

"Aye, it's like she's tryin' ta pretend nothin' happened."

They shrugged at each other then decided that would be a good time to continue with their previous conversation.

"So, let me get this straight," started Hiccup as they began walking again. "You like painting, your sister likes sculpting, your mother likes drawing, your brother and dad likes lifting weights--"

"Brian likes lifting, but mah dad just likes fightin'."

"Right, and your other brother likes running...his legs and his mouth."

The both chuckled.

Hiccup continued, "Sounds like half of you are the physical type, and the other half is artistic."

"Aye. Probably get th' artistic part from mah mum's side."

"Oh, no. It is most DEFINITELY from your dad's side." he exclaimed sarcastically.

The boys continued laughing till they reached their destination: the dining room.

Mostly everyone was already done with eating their breakfast, though Merida and her brothers and her mother still remained. Elinor was yet again trying to teach Merida the delicacy of table manners, though this was another hard subject for the princess. Though it was nothing like sewing, Merida's eating habits had never changed since she was little, and it was hard to change them now. The princes had just finished stuffing their mouths and grabbed a few breakfast rolls before scampering off through the door behind Hiccup and Cathal.

"No, dear. Cradle the spoon in your hand and balance it between your fingers."

Merida's hand cramped up from too much concentration, then watched as her porridge slipped back into her bowl. Grumbling in frustration, she let the spoon drop and placed her head on the table next to her bowl.

"Sit up, Merida. You're getting your food in your hair. Come now. Try again." The Queen waited for her daughter's head to rise before demonstrating once again and sipping her breakfast as gracefully as possible.

Sighing, the princess grabbed her utensil and tried moving as her mother did.

"Good. Now relax. Remember to always keep your back straight."

Merida grimaced through the continuous reminders and instructions as Hiccup and Cathal ladled themselves some breakfast. They talked about the people and events held in the land of MacGuffin as Merida continued her lesson, though Hiccup couldn't help but catch his eyes drifting toward the red hair in the corner of his eye. It didn't help that she began enveloping herself in Hiccup and Cathal's conversation after the Queen had given up, finished her meal and excused herself from the room.

"...and as ye probably couldn't tell from th' spread here, we're very proud of our breads."

"I can see why." Hiccup said, picking up another roll and using it to dip in his porridge.

Cathal continued talking, being sure to enunciate every word as they finished up their breakfast, Merida still trying to figure out her spoon.

"So did your dad have anything planned for the families today?" Hiccup inquired after his partner was finished talking.

"Oh, well mah dad had decided ta let everyone have th' day off. Especially after..." his eyes switched between Hiccup and Merida.

Hiccup also looked at Merida, remembering the previous day's unfortunate event. Though Merida just raised her eyebrows as if she had no idea.

"After what?" she said, looking at the both of them.

Cathal's face sank a bit as if he was afraid of her reaction. "Well...after yesterday when you...with th' ice an' all..."

Merida gave a small chuckle. "Yer dad shouldn't worry 'bout that. Ah'm perfectly fine."

"Are you sure?" said Hiccup, looking at her with a worried look, "You seemed pretty scared when-"

"Ah wasn't scared!"

Both the boys jumped at this sudden reaction, even though Cathal had braced himself for it.

"B-but you said-"

"That was just a reaction!"

Before any of them could collect themselves, Merida stood up and stormed out of the room, her stomps rattling her bowl, still filled with her breakfast. Hiccup wanted to call out to her, stop her to see what was wrong, but his words were caught in his mouth and he just stared with his mouth open. He looked to Cathal for help, but he just shrugged.

"Ah guess she may not be as alright as we thought." Then he stood and left Hiccup alone in the room.

The viking just sat there for a moment, not believing what had just happened, then took Cathal's absence as an invitation to go talk to Merida. Grabbing a couple more breakfast rolls, he went off to find where she went.

It didn't take long to find her. She was hiding out in her room, curled up on her cot where she pretended to be asleep.

"Merida?" Hiccup called to her, finding her door wide open. "Can I come in?"

She didn't respond, so after a few minutes, she just walked in and sat on the edge of her cot. He couldn't see her face which was covered with her hair, though he could see her face was red and her body trembled, shaking the cot.

"Here," he said, handing her the rolls he grabbed, "I noticed you didn't eat much as breakfast."

"Not hungry..." she replied, though her voice shook and cracked.

Shrugging, he placed them on a small chest near the cot. Then he waited a few more minutes before speaking again.

"Do you want to talk?"

She shook her head, her curls covering her face even more.

"Merida..." he was about to inquire about the lake incident, but at that moment, Merida sat up, and Hiccup could see her cheeks were tear-stained and her freckled her hidden behind the deep red of her cheeks.

"Why was ah so scared?"

Hiccup's eyebrows furrowed. "What?"

"Ah've looked Mor'du, th' Demon Bear, in th' eyes an' ah wasn't nearly as frightened as ah was on th' water. Ah've climed the Crone's

Tooth with no support or help an' mah body didn't go limp when ah nearly fell like ah did when th' ice broke."

Hiccup stared at her, dumbfounded. Her eyes weren't sad as her tears suggested, but more angry. Hiccup could only guess she was angry with herself. He didn't know what to do or say as he stared into his eyes as if the answer she was looking for was there.

"...What's the Crone's Tooth?..." he finally pushed out of his mouth.

Merida groaned and laid back down on the cot. She had forgotten she hadn't told him about it.

"It's a large rock next to a waterfall that's at least a hundred feet high. It is known as th' gateway to th' Fire Falls." she mumbled.

Hiccup was about to ask what in Odin's name the Fire Falls were, but he kept his mouth shut as she already seemed distressed enough for having to explain something to him, so he just nodded slowly. He then turned to her previous explosion and tried coming to a quick conclusion.

"Well, maybe you were so scared because...you were all alone on the ice?"

She sat up again, pushing her curls away, "But everyone was there, an' ah was alone when ah was clawin' on a giant pillar of rocks. Except Angus was with me."

It took a moment for Hiccup to realize this was the Crone's Tooth again, and he set his mind to thinking again.

"Maybe...it was because you were defenseless..."

She looked up into his eyes again, a bit at a loss of words to argue.

Hiccup continued, trying to explain his point. "I assume you had some sort of weapon when facing Mor'du so you could fight against him, and when one climbs a rock surface they have the ability to ascend or descend up and down where they want to go. Sure, there's the possibility of getting killed or falling, but when you stood on the ice, it seemed like there was nothing you could do. You had to wait for someone to come save you else the possibility of death was a certainty."

After he finished, they remained in silence, Hiccup waiting for a reaction while Merida continued to stare at him with her round eyes. She ran over everything in her mind, the ice and Hiccup's reasoning colliding with one another. She wasn't trembling anymore, and her tears had dried against her skin.

Sighing, she grabbed two of the rolls from the chest that Hiccup had put down only before throwing one of them at his face. It bounced off his cheek before landing on the floor.

"Hey! What was that for?" he exclaimed.

"It's not fair."

"What?"

"It's not fair how ye can fix everythin' ye see!"

"Wha-? I don't-"

"Aye ye do! Any sort of problem ah have, ye can always clam me down an' fix it. Ye helped mah mum an' I talk ta each other again, ye saved me from th' ice, an' just now ye helped me understand myself. An' it's not fair 'cause ah haven't helped ye at all. Ah can't even understand ye sometimes."

"Are you kidding me? You've been helping me try to find the other clan that might have killed my mom."

"But we haven't even found one clue."

"True, but you still thought of it, and if it weren't for you, I'd probably be at the bottom of the ocean right now, waiting for some shark to eat my remains."

"But yer so good at everythin'!" she huffed, stuffing the other roll in her mouth. She actually was rather hungry. "Ah wish ah could be like ye." she said after swallowing.

"What? Why on earth would you want to be like me? You're brave, smart, sweet-"

"Selfish."

"ENERGETIC, a great archer, and you're...well beautiful." He rubbed the back of his neck, fighting to keep the blood from rushing to his face.

Merida rolled her eyes. "An' what is that ta bein' a kind-hearted, inventive, dragon-ridin', string bean of a viking?"

"A lot more than you think...especially the string bean part..."

"Oy, muscles aren't the only things of worth in this world." she smiled at him, finishing the rest of her roll.

"Hey, I thought I came in here to cheer YOU up."

"Ah'm not as much of a damsel in distress as ye think ah am."

"But you're more of a damsel in distress than you pretend to be."

"Watch it, toothpick."

"First I'm a string bean, now I'm a toothpick?"

"Aye, an' ye'll always be a Hiccup." she picked up the other roll from the floor and threw it at him again, this time bopping him on the nose.

He rubbed where the roll hit him, then watched as she stood up and walked to the door.

"Thanks fer comin' ta talk ta me, Hiccup." she said, stopping in the doorway. "An' if there's anythin' ah can do ta get ye home, just ask."

"Well, unless you can find a place that's twelve days North of hopeless, and a few degrees South of freezing to death, I'm not sure there's much anyone can do."

She chortled, "Why would ye vikings live in such a place?"

"Well, we have stubbornness issues."

"Ye got that right."

He rolled his eyes, then grabbed the last roll off the chest and threw it at her before standing up. Unlike Hiccup, however, she caught it and threw it right back at a higher speed, hitting him in the arm as he tried protecting himself. Laughing, they left the room, only to stop in front of a large figure with a ghost-like expression planted on their face.

"What was that about vikings?"

13. Chapter 13

****Panic****

Hiccup felt sick to his stomach as he looked into Cathal MacGuffin's face. What should he do? Pretend it was a joke? That Merida just calls him a viking sometimes to make fun of him? Would he believe him? Physically, all he did was stand there with his eyes wide open, mouth slightly agape.

Merida, on the other hand, was internally screaming at herself for being so careless. Hiccup had entrusted his secret to her, and she felt like she had taken a dagger and stabbed him in the back. She too was trying to find a loophole, a story to quickly tell Cathal, not knowing how he'd react.

All three figures remained motionless, the heavy silence choking all of them. Merida tried pushing a few words out of her mouth, but all that came out was inaudible sounds that stuttered through the air. The tension continued to rise with each second that ticked by, making Hiccup want to throw up his breakfast more and more. Unfortunately for them, their sudden silence made him all the more suspicious.

The eerie spell was broken by the very one who insinuated it as Cathal opened his mouth to speak again.

"What was that about vikings?" he repeated as if they didn't hear him.

"Nothin'!" Merida said quickly, snapping herself into focus. "Just a little somethin' between Hiccup an' I."

Cathal switched his attention to Hiccup, his eyes darting at him as

if demanding a verification.

Hiccup's mouth snapped shut, his teeth clicking against each other from the force. But Cathal's stare clashed against his usual calm profile.

"Y-yes." he stuttered. "A j-joke we came up with after she found me."

"Aye, ah though he was a viking so that's what ah called him fer a while." Cut in Merida quickly. Though she spoke so fast it would have been hard for Catan to keep up.

Cathal nodded slowly, but other than that he didn't move. He gave no reaction, making both Hiccup and Merida very nervous. Though it was nothing compared to what he said next.

"Oh, well if that's all, then sorry for being in your way. I was just on my way to find Brian, have you seen him?" His entire posture and attitude changed, his suspicious and studying demeanor now a smiling, cheerful attitude.

Merida narrowed her eyes, not believing what was going into her ears. Just as slowly as he nodded his head, she shook hers.

"N-no, ah haven't seen him."

"That's alright. Well, have a good one." and he left the two of them down the hall, his large feet echoing off the walls.

Hiccup's mouth opened again, one of his eyes twitching as he continued to stare at the spot where Cathal was previously standing. Once again, they stood in silence, only this time their faces struck with confusion instead of horror.

Eventually, Merida turned to Hiccup, snapping him out of his trance. "What just happened?"

Hiccup blinked a few times before speaking, "I...have no idea." he looked back through the hall to where Cathal had disappeared.

After a moment, he gestured to Merida, and soon they were walking down the hallway opposite of the Lord's son, still unsure of what happened.

****Dinner Time****

The second dinner Hiccup had with the MacGuffins was very different than the first. Hiccup was thankful Brian and Catan had once again sandwiched him in their conversations, however Merida wasn't as lucky. Cathal had seated himself next to her, though he appeared to be ignoring her and Hiccup throughout the entire dinner conversation. It didn't help that the Queen who was seated on her other side felt her daughter was being rude for not speaking to him. As they ate, she continuously gestured and stared at her daughter, trying to get her to open her mouth. But every time the princess turned to the boy sitting next to her, he took the opportunity to stuff his face with roast mutton.

For everyone else, the meal went on as usual, the patriarch bellowing

their conversation and laughs across the room while the others talked and ate. But neither Hiccup nor Merida had any appetite that evening.

"Merida, are ye alright, lass?" said Lady MacGuffin, noticing the princess' still full plate.

"Aye. Uh, no. Ah'm just not feelin' well. May ah be excused?" she said as she gave a slight glance toward Cathal who took the opportunity to turn and speak to his sister.

"Of course. Elinor?" Muireall looked to the Queen for a confirmation, who nodded.

Merida scooted her seat backwards, then stood up to leave. But just before she left the room, she managed to catch Hiccup's eye and nod her head to him. At first, he had no idea what she wanted, but it became clear in his mind and as soon as she was out of sight, he too excused himself.

Closing the oak door to the sounds of laughter and words behind him, Hiccup found Merida standing in the hallway waiting for him.

"He knows." she said as soon as she heard the door latch into the wall.

Hiccup shrugged. "Maybe he doesn't. He hasn't said anything yet."

"Aye, he hasn't said anythin'. He hasn't said a word ta either of us all afternoon!"

"Well, maybe he's just waiting for some...evidence or something."

"Aye, that may be true. That means we'll have ta be extra careful now."

"Yeah, just until we get back to your home at least."

"Sorry by th' way."

"For what?"

"Ah let th' word 'viking' slip. It's mah fault we're in this mess."

"Don't worry about it. If it wasn't you, it'd be me."

"Let's just hope our cover-up was good enough fer now."

"It wasn't." said a voice through the hall.

Both Hiccup and Merida turned to see a figure lurking in the shadows, hidden away from the torch light. Knowing they now knew where he was, Cathal stepped out into the light. Both the viking and the princess cursed under their breaths to their respective beliefs. Cathal gave them a blank stare, making so they couldn't read his hidden expression.

"Ah knew somethin' was wrong when ah said th' word 'viking' in front of ye and ye both froze." Cathal continued walking toward them as he spoke. "Though ah never guessed ye actually were one, Hiccup." he stopped in front of the brunette, "Are ye a viking?"

Hiccup gulped under the intimidating stare. Cathal was so close to him he could smell his breath. He sighed, there was no point hiding it now.

"Yes."

Hiccup braced himself for the reaction, though he had no idea how Cathal would respond. He didn't seem as headstrong as Merida, so maybe he wouldn't attack him like she did. But then again, Merida did mention that vikings had attacked their clans before. Hiccup closed his eyes shut, just getting one more glimpse of how much bigger Cathal was than him. He heard something move in front of him, making his nerves tense up, but instead of feeling a punch on his cheek, he got a mouthful of curly, red hair.

"But it's alright!" cried Merida, "he's a good viking!"

She had squeezed herself into the tiny space between Hiccup and Cathal, protecting the viking with her body.

"Oh, ah don't doubt it." said Cathal, taking a step back. "Though ah'll admit, ye don't look much like a viking."

"Yeah, I know." said Hiccup, spitting out some of Merida's hair in the process.

"So...yer alright with this?...With Hiccup being a viking?" said Merida slowly, grabbing Hiccup's sleeve behind her to make sure he couldn't get hurt.

"Sure, why wouldn't ah be?" Cathal shrugged his shoulders.

"Ye know as well as I that vikings attacked our lands."

"But ye seem to trust him. An' Hiccup's a friend, ah doubt he would be able ta invade Scotland with that kind of body anyway. No offense."

"None taken." called Hiccup from behind the fiery mass of hair.

Merida narrowed her eyes. She couldn't be sure if he was sincere, but she finally let in when he gave no sign of hostility and stepped away.

"Well, how did ye get out here anyway? We've been standin' in front of th' door th' whole time." she crossed her arms, glaring at Young MacGuffin.

"Yer brothers found a small passageway from th' kitchen ta th' hallway yesterday. I went through it as soon as ye both were out of th' room."

Merida rolled her eyes. "Th' wee devils." It sounded like the kind of mischief her brothers would get into.

Both Hiccup and Cathal laughed at her, but it only made her roll her eyes again.

"Oh, by the way." said Hiccup after he had his fill of laughter. "You wouldn't mind keeping this a secret, right?" he turned to Cathal.

"Aye. Ah'm not quite as loud a mouth as Catan."

This time all of them were laughing.

****Of Tours and Dragons****

ACHOO!

Hiccup sniffed in an icy breath of air, clearing his nose. Lord MacGuffin still felt bad about the ice fishing incident, so he thought their time would be better spent exploring the village surrounding the MacGuffins' home. It wasn't as large as the village in DunBroch, but it still held the same cheery, inviting attitude. Not many people were outside due to the frosty weather, but small markets were set up selling blankets, boots, and of course, bread. Occasionally they would see a few children running around playing with snow and dogs.

Since Cathal had officially learned Hiccup's secret the night before, he felt more relaxed around him and the two of them, along with Merida, journeyed through the streets of MacGuffin as Cathal showed them the sites. He wasn't as talkative as Hiccup and Merida, but his company was still enjoyed just as much.

"Bless you." said Merida as Hiccup wiped his nose. Today she wore a dark green dress similar to her favorite blue adventure dress, but this one was lined with silver ribbons and embroidery. Normally she wouldn't wear something so flashy, but it was one of the few remaining dresses she had packed. As they walked through the village, she constantly pulled her cloak around her as to not attract attention, but who wouldn't notice a red-haired girl with two boys, one twice her size the other walking on a metal device of a leg?

The three of them left behind the others soon after they left stepped out of the warm house, taking to their own adventures.

"So do ye have a smithy around here? Hiccup's quite the metalworker." said Merida after they had just finished meeting a family close to the MacGuffins.

"Are ye really?" Cathal looked over at Hiccup, examining his stature again.

"Aye, he made his own prosthetic." Merida pointed to the squeaking metal below Hiccup's left leg.

"Oh, well our smithy is down th' street." he pointed in the direction they were walking toward a small shack-looking building with a large chimney and large amounts of smoke billowing out of the top of it.

As soon as they got inside, Hiccup felt right at home. Unlike

Ailean's smithy, this one was smaller and was a lot more crowded with swords, spears, axes, cabers, etc. All the tools and supplies were arranged almost exactly like Gobber's smithy (now dragon dental shop), it even had the same sort of window where the vikings of Berk would throw their broken weapons for Gobber and Hiccup to repair. The boy was so absorbed in everything, he didn't notice his eyes watering.

"Hiccup, are ye alright?"

He blinked away the tears, seeing Merida looking into his face.
"Yeah...smoke got in my eyes."

"Did ye need somethin'?" called a voice, startling all of them. It was then they noticed the large, bulky man hammering away on an axe handle. He was larger than Ailean, and his blonde, curly hair poked out from under his metal helmet that came down to covered one of his eyes. He wore a dark grey shirt, that Hiccup guessed was once brown, and a traditional, green MacGuffin clan kilt supported by a brown, leather belt.

"Hello!" chirped Merida.

"Garbhan*, this is Princess Merida of DunBroch, and Hiccup."
announced Cathal.

"Oh, just some friends of yers, huh? Well, sorry but ah have a lot o' work ta do an' ah haven't got any time fer ye lot. So if ye don't mind..." brushing past them, he opened the door, expecting them to leave.

Merida felt insulted by this cold welcome, but just as she was about to open her mouth in protest, Cathal pushed both her and Hiccup out the door and back into the cold. As soon as they were forced back outside, the door shut behind them and soon after, the familiar hammering noise continued in its normal rhythm.

"How rude!" exclaimed Merida, turning back toward the door.

"Sorry..." said Cathal, "Ah guess he's just in one of his moods."

"I'll say. He's just about as grouchy as a dragon that missed breakfast." Hiccup added.

Cathal gave a small chuckle. "You vikings have many dragon stories?"

"Well, yes. In fact we train them. Used to fight, but now train."

Cathal started laughing, but stopped once he noticed neither of the other two were. "Oh, ye were serious?"

"Yeah, they're quite common in my village."

"Aye." said Merida, "Ah've never seen one, but ah hope to someday."

Cathal raised his eyebrows a bit. Sure, it was one thing to know that a new friend was actually the child of an enemy, but...dragons? That was a bit harder to believe. Then again, it was hard to believe that a bear was actually the Queen transformed. He shrugged his shoulders and they continued walking, but he couldn't stop thinking about the dragons.

_Are they really real? If they are, how come none of them are here?_Thoughts and questions raced through his mind, and they lasted all through the rest of the day.

****A couple hours later****

"So what do we do now?" said Merida as she chomped on a small biscuit. The trio had made their last stop at a bakery for lunch, but now they had the entire rest of the day to get into all kinds of mischief.

"We could always go back to Cathal's house." Hiccup rubbed his hands, sad that they had to leave yet another warm shelter.

Merida huffed. "But we spent th' entire day inside yesterday. We all could use th' fresh air."

"Well, what would you suggest?"

Merida looked around. Sure the plains were peaceful, but they were empty...and boring. There were no woods for at least a couple miles, and the river was frozen. The only thing that caught Merida's eye was the large, white mountain that stood upriver.

"What about the mountain?"

Both Cathal and Hiccup gave disbelieving looks, turning their eyes from Merida to the distant mountain whose cold winds now brushed against their freezing skin.

"How about we not?" said Hiccup.

"Aye, it's far too deep into winter, an' even if we could go, we wouldn't even make it a quarter of th' way up before dark."

Merida gave another huff, finishing off her biscuit. "Well, is there ANY other place we could go?"

"Well, there is one." said Cathal, rubbing the back of his neck. "It's not too far, an' it'll give us a break from the cold."

"Hey, ah already said we should stay away from th' indoors." Merida protested.

"Who ever said it was inside?" Cathal gave them both a smile, then started off down the road, a bewildered Merida and Hiccup only following him after exchanging looks of confusion. How could something outside be warm in this weather?

As they ventured across the snowy plains, they exchanged stories, laughing and crying together as they listened to Hiccup telling of the adventure of the Red Death, and sharing some old Norse tales as well while Cathal and Merida told Gaelic fables and legends,

including the one of their parents' alliance.

"Wow, at least something good came from a viking attack. Got your parents to stop bickering against one another." Hiccup commented after they finished.

"Ah guess that's one way to think of it." Merida kicked a lone rock in their path.

"Oh, we're almost there." Cathal pointed out into the lonely distance.

They had walked toward the same mountain Merida had suggested earlier, the landscape getting more and more jagged and rocky. Both Hiccup and Merida looked to where he pointed, but all they could see was a large mass of rocks surrounded by a few dead plants.

"Aaaand we are looking for...what exactly?" remarked Hiccup.

"C'mon." Cathal gestured for them to follow, and they did for a while, but only until Cathal began crawling into a small opening in the rocks. Not long after, Cathal disappeared under the snowy surface.

Excited, Merida dashed off to follow him down the hole. Though Hiccup was a bit more uncomfortable about descending into a dark hole. He crept closer to where his companions disappeared, peering over the gap in the rocks. All of a sudden, he felt a wave of heat blow onto his face, making him step back a bit. Now a bit excited himself, he climbed down, bits of snow falling with him as he tried to get his prosthetic unstuck after getting it wedged between two rocks. Eventually, he finally made it all the way down, though he was a bit surprised to find a great amount of heat and light surrounding him.

It seemed like Hiccup stepped into a dream. Cathal brought him and Merida to a hidden spring, domestic plants growing all around giving a sweet aroma to the room as a waft of steam grew heavy on Hiccup's hair. If he could describe everything in the room with one word, it'd be "beautiful." Hiccup could see the light was created from strange-looking blue crystals that glowed.

"What is this place?" he asked, still looking around.

"One of th' hidden jewels of th' mountain." Cathal said, smiling.

"This is amazin'!" Merida shouted, her voice echoing off the walls. With a burst of energy, she pulled off her cloak and boots and plunged her feet into the water. "It's so warm!"

"Th' mountain is actually a volcano. Ah suppose it gets heated from that." Cathal said, sitting down on a large rock.

She laughed as she kept running through the water, her silver trimmings glistening against the light. Hiccup sat next to Cathal, pulling off his own cloak as the heat flowed through his body.

"So how did you ever find this place?" Hiccup asked.

"Everyone here knows about them. Though they usually come in th' fall when it starts ta get cold, but not too cold where they wouldn't want ta travel this far."

"Oy!" Merida called, "Why don't ye laddies come in?"

Both the boys shook their heads violently, not wanting to get wet. But it only provoked Merida, and she kicked a wave of water over them.

"Hey!" yelled Hiccup, "We have to go back outside eventually ya know!" he tried wiping the water off his clothes, but Merida just splashed them again.

Hiccup had enough. After trying to shield himself with his arms, he leaped up and tried kicking water over Merida, unfortunately his balance was thrown off by his metal foot, and he stumbled over backwards, landing in a patch of grass.

Merida laughed at him hysterically, nearly falling over herself into the water. Hiccup looked over to find Cathal laughing at him as well, making Hiccup's face grow red from embarrassment. Merida was still giggling when she offered a hand to him, though her laughter stopped completely when instead of pulling himself up, Hiccup pulled Merida to the ground, and she landed next to him, half of her dress getting wet in the process.

"Hey!" she yelled at him, then tried shoving him into the water, but he was too quick. He scrambled up and jumped behind Cathal who spun around, not wanting to be involved. Merida picked up her cloak and threw it at the both of them, though it didn't get far and it landed at Cathal's feet. The other two began laughing at her, making her face turn as red as Hiccup's did. Huffy as ever, she sat back down on the ground.

"If ah had mah bow, ah'd skewer th' both of ye." she gave them a sour look, but they didn't stop laughing.

Eventually they went to sit next to her with apologetic looks in their eyes. After a bit of persuasion, they convinced Merida to not go back into the water to let their clothes dry, but they all agreed just letting their feet rest in the spring would be alright. Five bare feet swished through the water, and soon they completely forgot about the cold weather they had yet to return to. Hiccup decided it would be best to not get his prosthetic any more wet than it already was, so he took it off, exposing his stump under his knee.

"This was fun." said Merida, leaning back. "Ye picked a great place ta relax, Cathal."

"Though we'll have to go back soon." Hiccup kicked up his leg, letting the cooler air penetrate his nerves before relaxing after he put it back in the water. "We don't want to be traveling in the dark."

Merida groaned, putting her pout face back on. "Can't we just stay here forever?" there was a hint of sarcasm as she spoke.

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "Sure. We can become cave-people and live

underground forever." His tone was definitely sarcastic.

The princess chuckled. Though she truly meant what she said. Here, she felt at peace, but there was still that sense of freedom in the air. Sure, she didn't have her weapons and there wasn't enough space to go riding, but here she could still be herself.

****News From Home****

Elinor brought the lovely china to her lips as she sipped the warm liquid. She could feel it run down her throat and into her stomach, the winter chills now gone from her body. Sighing in satisfaction, she allowed herself to lean back into her chair that was so comfortably sitting by a fireplace in the MacGuffins' home. Though it was only a little into the evening, the Queen set aside this time to relax. The party she was in that consisted of Lady MacGuffin, the triplets and Sorchia, had their tour of the village cut short once the brothers ran havoc through the butcher's shop. As punishment, they were sent to bed early with no supper, though there's no telling if they actually went to bed or not.

The Queen let her eyes close for a bit, the sweet delicacy of silence enveloping her. All that could be heard was the whistling of the wind outside, and the crackling of the fire. For a moment, everything was just peaceful.

And then that moment ended.

Suddenly, Fergus and Macrath burst into the room, laughing a bellowing. Elinor put down her cup on a table next to her, sighing. Putting back on her superior figure, she sat up to the edge of her chair and waited for the two men to either sit down in their own seats or leave the room. But they just stood in the middle of the room, shouting and miming their events of the day. Apparently after they took a quick tour, the two of them went hunting in the distant woods, but they brought back no game after Fergus got his cloak caught on a tree branch.

"In mah defense, yer trees are much shorter than th' ones back home." said Fergus, taking a chair and dragging it next to his wife. After he sat down, he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "Evenin' love. How was yer day?"

"Fine, till the wind blew in a tumultuous amount of noise through the door."

Fergus gave a breathy laugh at her, showing his kiddish attitude.

"Oh, and I believe your sons need to review the proper behavior when in public."

"Ah, so that was you! Ah was wonderin' why th' butcher was so upset when we went ta meet him!" he puffed out another round of laughing before allowing his wife to speak again.

"That was ENTIRELY your fault." she said, turning her head toward the fire so she couldn't see him.

Fergus stopped laughing. "But ah wasn't even there that time."

"No, but I certainly didn't teach them to be the rambunctious little children they are. It must have been you, especially since you're still a child yourself."

The King gave a smaller laugh, then took his wife's cheek and turned her to face him so he could plant a small peck on her lips. "Sorry ye had a bad day, darlin'."

She gave him a small smile, but it fell when she turned to see Lord MacGuffin smirking at them both. Fergus let out a cough, then tried to change the subject.

"So..._ahem_...is everyone back yet?"

"Well, I know the Lord's wife and daughter are here, and I saw Brian and Catan slip in not too long before yourselves. Though I haven't seen Merida, Cathal or Hiccup."

"Hmm, they better get back soon. It's gettin' pretty dark out there." Lord MacGuffin said, looking toward the window.

Elinor turned her head as well, a subconscious worried look spreading across her face.

"Ah'm sure they'll be fine." said Fergus, trying to reassure his wife.

She nodded, remembering Merida's strength and determination. Cathal was a strong boy, he could pull himself through. And Hiccup?...Well, the others could help him out.

Just then the door swung open again, and one of the MacGuffins' servants walked in, followed by someone both the Queen and King recognized.

"A messenger from DunBroch." announced the servant, and he let the one behind him pass. A man wearing DunBroch's red and green plaid kilt grabbed a sealed letter from his pouch and held it out to the royal family. The Queen quickly stood and grabbed the letter. She began opening it just after thanking the messenger who bowed and left.

"It's from General Duncan**," said Elinor as she read from the parchment. Suddenly she drew in a quick breath, "Fergus! You have to read this!"

The King nearly toppled his chair over as he ran to his wife and took the letter. The Lord also stood, waiting for the news.

"Oh, dear." Fergus said. He turned to his wife, "We may have to cut out visit short."

She nodded and turned to spread the news, but when she opened the door, she was met with three laughing figures. It was the worst timing. Merida, Hiccup and Cathal were standing in the doorway, now confused about the solemn looks on the adults' faces.

*Scottish name meaning "rough"

****Scottish name meaning "brown warrior"**

14. Chapter 14

****Realization****

Hiccup's heart beat faster and faster as he ran. Despite him missing a leg, they moved very fast across the forest floor. Was he excited? Fearful? Both? It all didn't matter as he knew what he was running for, and now there was no stopping him. As he tripped over rocks and roots, he recalled the events that led to this moment:

Hiccup was back in the home of MacGuffin, the Queen standing before him, fear mixed with panic and surprise swirling in her eyes.

"Oh, hi mum!" Merida said cheerfully, trying to lighten the mysteriously dreary mood of the room.

"Oh, I'm sorry to tell you this, lass." said Elinor, giving a sigh of relief as she calmed herself down. "But we have to return home as soon as possible."

"WHAT?" Merida looked to her father, who was still reading the recently received letter. Merida stormed over to the King, snatched the paper that he was only half-done reading and began reading its contents. Her eyes narrowed more and more as she neared the bottom, and when she finished she handed it back to her father to finish. Without a word she stormed past Hiccup and Cathal, who were still confused as ever, and down the hall toward her room.

"What's going on?" said Hiccup, turning back to the Queen.

She sighed. "There was a strange occurrence at the castle. Our High General wrote to us, saying a beast crawled into the castle grounds. They're not sure what it is, but they mentioned they managed to shoot its right shoulder as it crawled into the forest."

Wait. The beast is at their home...and they want to go back? Hiccup thought to himself, though he dared not speak aloud in front of Her Majesty.

"Did they say what it looked like?" asked Lord MacGuffin. "In case it crawls all the way here, we can notify you."

"It just says here that the guards said it was large, and black. The events happened last night." The King said still reading.

Large? Black? Beast? Hiccup raced through his mind, creating all sorts of images with his imagination. Though as one flashed by, he could help but be reminded of someone he once loved dearly.

Toothless? Hiccup was horror-struck. What if it was Toothless? But how could he get all the way here? Did they say they injured it? But a down dragon is a dead dragon as Gobber always said.

"Hiccup, are ye alright?"

Hiccup jumped a bit at Cathal's voice. Blinking, he had realized that his eyes were growing with each question that he had run through his mind. He looked around the room, examining the panicked adults, then

he grabbed Cathal's arm and tried pulling him away. Unfortunately Cathal was about three times his size and was only jerked about one step.

"What are ye doin'?" he said as Hiccup tried pulling him again.

"C'mon! We have to find Merida!" his voice shook as he spoke.

The larger boy gave in and they ran down the hall to find Merida busily packing all her belongings in such a rush. She ran back and forth, grabbing dresses and belts, throwing some of the things she grabbed into her brothers' bags that she had lined up on the floor. The boys themselves were no where in sight.

"Merida, we have to talk!" panted Hiccup, catching his breath with every syllable.

"No time fer that." Merida continued running around. "Mah home has been attacked by some strange beast an' ah need ta get back ta get rid of it."

"Wait, Merida. You don't have to do that!"

"An' why not?"

"Because it's Toothless!"

Merida stopped dead in her tracks. Though she raised one of her eyebrows in confusion, and Hiccup gave her a minute or two to remember. Soon her eyes lit up and she dropped everything in her arms. Cathal also widened his eyes and stared at Hiccup.

"Yer dragon?"

"Yes."

"But ah thought he couldn't fly without ye." Cathal put in, remembering Hiccup's stories.

"Believe me, I know it's him. What other strange beast could it be?"

Merida put a hand on his shoulder. "Ah know ye miss him. But seriously, Hiccup. Th' chances of-"

"Look, I KNOW IT'S HIM!" Hiccup jerked away from her hand.

Merida slowly retracted her hand, "Alright, so what if it is him? What are ye supposed ta do about it?"

"I'll go find him."

"Hiccup, th' entire village is probably hunting him now. How do ye expect ta find him before them?"

He turned back towards her. "I don't have to. Knowing Toothless, he'd find me first."

Merida and Cathal exchanged looks, a bit of disbelief in their eyes.

But Merida shook her head and looked back at Hiccup.

"Alright, but ah'm goin' with ye." she said.

"Merida, I don't need protection. And I don't care if you don't think it's him."

"Ah never said ah was goin' ta protect ye."

"But-"

"First off, yer useless in th' woods. Ye don't know yer lefts and rights or yer ups and downs."

Hiccup rolled his eyes, though he knew it was true. The most he could do is run around in circles.

"Second, Ah wouldn't want ta miss a chance ta see a real life dragon!" she beamed up suddenly, a giant smile reaching all the way to her ears.

Hiccup returned her smile, though deep in his heart he knew she was only looking out for him so he wouldn't get into any trouble.

"Well, if she's goin', ah might as well go too." said Cathal, reminding them he was still there.

"Are you sure? Because-" Hiccup stopped talking once he saw Cathal's eyebrow raise, giving him a look that said: _You're really going to try to talk me out of this?_ Instead of finishing, Hiccup sighed and rubbed a hand through his hair. "Okay. But you should know what he looks like. He's black, large, yellow-ish green-ish eyes, black wings, black claws-"

"Black teeth?" Merida cut in, rolling her eyes.

Hiccup glared at her. "No. White teeth."

"But ah thought he didn't have teeth. Since ye call him 'Toothless' an' all." Cathal cocked his head at them.

"They're retractable." Hiccup explained. "I thought I told you earlier this afternoon."

"Sorry...forgot..." Cathal rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment, though Hiccup and Merida forgave him quickly and continued with their conversation.

"Well, knowin' mum, we'll probably leave tomorrow mornin'. But she wouldn't let us go out at all till she was sure whatever was at th' castle was caught or dead."

A shiver went down Hiccup's spine as he thought of his best friend being killed.

"So...what do we do?" Cathal said timidly.

"Sneak out." Merida's tone was blunt, and she shrugged her shoulders as if everyone should have known the solution already.

"So it's settled then?" Hiccup was eager to go pack his things so they could leave, even though they weren't leaving till morning anyway.

Merida and Cathal exchanged looks one last time before nodding.

"Let's go!"

****Passage****

Unfortunately, things didn't quite go as they expected. It was decided by the Queen that she, Merida, Hiccup and the triplets would remain at the house of MacGuffin till the beast was found.

"But mum!" Merida protested. Excluding the fact that it interrupted her plans, Merida didn't like to be seen as weak.

"No 'buts.' Merida, I know you're eager to catch it and show your strength, but it would kill me if something ever happened to you." the Queen placed her hands on her daughter's shoulders.

Merida sighed, though she understood. Normally she would have kept fighting, but her love for her mother was greater than the sword. Instead she nodded and headed towards Hiccup and Cathal's room to tell them the news. They didn't take it so easy either.

"Hiccup, you an' I are stayin' here till th' hunt is off." she grumbled.

"WHAT?" Hiccup had already began making plans on how they could find his dragon in the most effective way, and he was also teaching Cathal the best ways to approach his friend without scaring him.

He kept grumbling and murmuring as Merida explained it was her mother's idea, though he really knew that was the safest thing for the Queen to decide.

"Well, what about me?" asked Cathal, noticing how his name wasn't mentioned.

"Yer big an' strong. Yer dad will probably invite ye t' go on th' hunt." Merida gave another sigh, disappointed at the results of everything.

"Oh..." Cathal looked down, sad that he was the only one that could go.

Though Hiccup was still angry. His friend was out in the wild, only a forest away and all he could do was sit around waiting for him to get captured or killed. If he could just find Toothless, he could go home. He could see all the friends and family he left behind. He could see his dad, and Astrid, and the dragons, and everyone in the Academy.

With a determined look, he turned toward Cathal and Merida. "I'm going anyway." He didn't even wait for them to respond. His metal leg squeaked as he stomped out of the room, trying to find a solitary place to think. Through the hall, he passed Brian and Catan who were arguing whether or not Catan could join the hunt, but they stopped as

they saw Hiccup coming, his face red and eyes lit up like fire. But Hiccup didn't even notice and he stormed right passed them, and eventually made his way outside. He didn't know where he was going, but he just circled the house a few times, thinking and examining good escape routes so he could follow the hunting party out, but it didn't seem like there was much he could do without being spotted or breaking his back. There was one promising area, where there weren't many guards and the way out wasn't through a window that was over thirty feet high, but it was through a cellar door that was locked, and there would be no getting through it without making a racket.

Groaning and sighing, he lied down in the snow covering his forehead with the icy flakes to calm his headache. He watched small wisps of smoke escape his mouth as he breathed in and out.

Maybe I should just run and try to find him on my own. He thought, but he shook his head and covered himself with more snow. _No, I'd just get lost and probably die._ Grabbing his hair in frustration, he felt some of the snow melt through his scalp and drip onto the ground. Not long after his hands relaxed, and his arms flopped to the ground as a tear followed the melting snow to the ground. _...I was so close..._

Suddenly he looked up to find three heads peering down at him. Startled, he took in a breath, but relaxed again once he realized who it was. Hamish, Hubert and Harris giggled to see his surprise, but as quickly as they came, they sped off through the yard, accidentally kicking some of the snow into Hiccup's face.

Shaking his head, he sat up to see the triplets motioning and gesturing to him to follow. Not wanting to play at the moment, he laid back down in the snow, distressed. Unfortunately this act of apathy didn't phase the princes, and they ran over to him and began pulling at his arms and head, trying to get him to stand up.

"Ow! Knock it off!" he yelled, but he gave in once Hubert began pulling at his hair. "Alright, fine! What is it?" He stood up, brushing the snow off his clothes.

The three brothers giggled and ran off turning a corner around the house. Hiccup sighed, though he knew if he didn't follow, they'd just make him do it eventually. He ran after them, though he couldn't go as fast as they did with his prosthetic. But when he turned the same corner they did, he stopped as they were nowhere in sight.

He sighed, figuring the game was over and turned to where he had come from, though there was no point as he could have just laid down in the snow there. But once he did, the princes appeared again and jumped in front of him.

"Wha-? How do you keep doing that?"

They giggled some more and ran past him, running to the middle of the wall where they waited for him to follow. This time a bit of interest perked in him and he inched his way toward them slowly, afraid he would miss whatever they were about to do. Suddenly, Harris pushed in a large brick in the wall, revealing a tiny crawling space just big enough for one person. Eyes wide, Hiccup got on his hands and knees, not caring that the snow was numbing his red fingers. The tunnel ran

upward, toward a warm room with a fire going. Carefully, Hiccup began climbing upward, clawing the the stones to keep his grip when hoisting himself up. His prosthetic scraped along the floor, making quite a racket as he continued. Eventually he made it to the top, and he found himself in a large room with an aroma that made him rather hungry. All around, there were smoked meats drying from the ceiling and shelves. The glowing of a fire Hiccup had seen earlier was underneath a large row of meats, and though Hiccup was no cook, he could have guessed it was a boar.

Excited just as much as he was surprised, Hiccup's heart beat faster and faster as he once again accumulated a plan through his mind to escape the walls diving him from his friend. His thoughts were only interrupted when his three helpers scooted in front of him, giggling with delight.

"Thanks." said Hiccup, coming to his senses, "But how did you know I needed-" he stopped himself as he noticed a sort of glare similar to the one Merida had given him many times before planted on each of their faces as if to say: _You thought no one would notice you circling around the mansion over and over looking up and down the walls?_

"Thanks." Hiccup said again, and he proceeded to exit the room to know exactly where it was in the massive house. Unfortunately, the triplets weren't finished and they ran in front of him again, nearly tripping the poor viking.

"What is it?" said Hiccup, expecting them to disappear and hear of their pranks and mischievous deeds at dinner time.

The one in the middle stuck out a hand, open and facing upward as if demanding something. Hiccup's shoulders sagged as he let out a quiet groan. They had shown him what he wanted, now they demanded payment.

"Merida was right, you guys are devils."

****Searching****

"Ach, it smells in here." Merida complained as she slid gently down the stony shaft.

"Shh!" Hissed the eager viking boy who had already descended down into the snow.

The actual hunting party had already left just an hour before, Cathal being forced to go with them. Thanks to the princes' help, and Hiccup sneaking a few treats for them, the viking and the princess went ahead with their plan hoping to find what everyone else wanted to hunt. Not sure how long of a journey they would be on, they packed a few days food in small satchels they could swing over their shoulders, though the only weapon Merida could sneak away from her mother was a broad sword she had strapped to her hip.

"You shh!" Finally Merida had hit soft snow, and Hiccup tried pushing the stone block back in place. He had no idea how the triplets were able to move it with such ease. By the time he was done, he turned to find Merida already running to the stables. Though Hiccup would have been perfectly fine with hiking through snow, Merida convinced him

riding horses would be faster and better for survival in winter conditions.

He followed after her, falling and tripping over ever noise that echoed through the shadows of dusk. By the time he made it inside the hay-smelling stables, Merida was saddling up Angus, stroking his black coat as she adjusted everything. Hiccup walked over to Eacharn, though he only held out his hand to his nose as he did with dragons. The steed felt comforted under his touch, but was eager for a bit more attention. He lifted one of his hooves to get closer, but soon it was time for them to get going.

"Sorry, but you're staying here." he patted the horse's nose again, wishing he could give the animal something to eat as a treat. He knew Toothless always loved a fish now and then just as a show of affection.

After a while of adjusting and more hushed arguing over whether or not to actually ride the horse, Merida finally got Hiccup seated on Angus' saddle behind her. Hiccup moved around in his seat, trying to find a comfortable position, but it was useless.

"Who's there? No one's supposed to be in the stables as this hour!" called a voice, startling them both.

A man carrying a torch was walking briskly toward them, a confused and determined face searching for them in the dim light.

A startled Merida took the initiative and dug her heels into Angus' sides, making the Clydesdale dash forward and run off into the darkness of night. Hiccup felt the beast lurch forward underneath him and he wrapped his arms around Merida as he did on their first ride together. He felt her hair tickle his face and neck as the wind brushed past them, though the screaming of the cold didn't drown the sounds of the man's shouting as he ran after them, trying to catch up to the pair as they got farther and father from him.

The viking looked behind them to find the small torch light heading back toward the MacGuffins', and he knew there was no turning back now. He turned his head forward again as he could have sworn Merida laugh a little as the thrill and excitement overcame her. They continued at a galloped pace for a good few miles till they reached the edge of the forest. Angus finally came to a small trot, then eventually a walk once they knew they were safe in the darkness of the forest.

Hiccup sighed in relief once reality came back to him, though he still didn't let go of Merida's small waist. The eerie winds blowing through the black trees kept him on edge, though Merida seemed quite calm about the whole situation. The snow crunched under the heavy horseshoes that stomped through the ground, and soon Hiccup could feel small flakes land on his neck and ears.

Suddenly Merida leaned over to look behind them, searching for the edge of the forest, but she couldn't see it anymore. Smiling in satisfaction, she opened her satchel and pulled out a small lantern and some flint.

"Here." she said, handing her items to Hiccup.

After a bit of struggling to stay on the horse and keep all the equipment from falling, an orange light blinked through the shadowy woods, marking their position. Eyes and ears alert, they continued through the night as more and more snow piled on their heads. Occasionally, Merida would shake her head free of the flurries, but only before apologizing to Hiccup for getting snow all over him.

All that ran through Hiccup's mind at this point was the ebony dragon, and what might happen to him. He shivered at his fear of his friend's possible death, burned at the anger that he might be injured, and gleamed with hope that they would find him.

Merida was also thinking of the dragon, though she was a bit less optimistic about the situation. She too shook with fear, but it was more from the fear that what they might be searching for is more dangerous than they anticipated, she trembled with worry that Hiccup might be heartbroken should they never find Toothless, but she truly hoped that he was right, despite the lack of evidence and conclusions based on a memory.

They traveled for hours, searching through the falling snow that covered their tracks. Both kept their eyes and ears alert, despite the long night pulling on their weary eyelids. Their heads turned this way and that, jerking back and forth with every sound the forest made. Hiccup held the lantern high so they could see through the darkness, though they both knew it was highly unlikely they would find any trace of what they were looking for on that first night. It wasn't until Merida gave a small, yet noticeable yawn that they began looking for shelter instead of a dragon. After a few miles, they found a small cave, only just big enough for the trio to sleep comfortably through the night.

The flame from the lantern was used to start a small fire just at the edge of the cave, and the trio were covered in blankets and sheets, ready to sleep for the search in the morning light. Hiccup lay with a blanket separating him from the cold ground facing upward to see the stationary clouds and bright moon smiling down at him, trying to reassure his worried heart that only beat faster every time he saw a shadow move across the stars. Unfortunately, it was only an owl or some other nocturnal predator that was out hunting.

Merida was propped on her side, her red curls sprawled all over the dirty floor of the cave, but she was more protected from the cold as she curled up next to Angus, his warm belly moving up and down with a rhythmic pattern. She stared across the floor at the fire, and occasionally beyond that at Hiccup to find his green eyes tracing the stars. She was overall worried, as mentioned before, but as she lay watching the flames melt into ash, a small feeling of admiration came over her for the strong friendship Hiccup shared with his carnivore friend. She admired how Hiccup was willing to risk his life out here in the snowy wilderness based on the slim chance that he could see his best friend again, but she could see the hurt in his eyes of how long they were apart.

Pulling her blanket up, she buried her face in warmth. In truth, she didn't want Hiccup to find Toothless. If he found his dragon, he would be able to leave, and she didn't want that to happen. He had become too dear a friend to her that she couldn't just let him go. All this time she could have found ways to help him get back home, but she was too selfish for that. _But that's why I'm doing this

right?_ She thought to herself, _I'm doing this to prove to him I can let him go._

But she needed to prove she can let him go to someone else...

15. Chapter 15

****The Next Morning****

Hiccup woke up with a stick in his back. He twisted and turned against the uncomfortable piece of nature that was protruding into his body, but it was no use. Groaning and stretching his back to relieve the itch, he sat up to find the princess still fast asleep. Figuring she'd sleep a bit longer, he pulled his blanket back over his face to shield from the morning cold. Though it all the noise didn't help when Angus awoke from Hiccup's small movements and took the opportunity to snort, waking his owner.

Merida jolted upward with a start, but as Hiccup had done already, groaned and flopped back down to get a little more sleep. The horse knew his rider all too well, and gave a small whinny out of hunger and lipped a bit of Merida's exposed hair. The princess removed her arm from the protection of her blanket and swatted his large nose away. Not finding this to be amusing, Angus bit her blanket gently and pulled a bit, urging her to get up and feed him.

"Arg, fine!" she yelled, feeling the cold all around her. She threw a bit of frost at the horse to release her blanket, then dragged herself to her satchel where she pulled a small bag of feed. Eyes still only half open, she stood up and lifted the bag to Angus' nose to let him eat.

After listening to the crunching and chewing emanating from the horse's mouth, Hiccup finally gave up trying to go back to sleep and sat up, rubbing his eye. After cracking his neck he reached for his own bag to find something to eat. He shoved a bit of dried fruit into his mouth and started packing his sleeping equipment.

Their entire morning consisted of packing up camp and eating a silent breakfast of dried foods. The unusual silence continued as they departed once again on their search. They both just kept their mouths shut as they kept their eyes out for any amount of black against the white landscape. Though other than the trees, there was nothing.

It wasn't very long before Merida became extremely bored. She wasn't used to this unusually slow pace, and her attention span didn't last as long as Hiccup's. Angus too was itching to stretch his legs a bit more than just walking and snorted to get the attention of the two riders on his back. Merida patted his neck, but when she turned her head to announce her boredom, she couldn't help but notice the great amount of determination still planted on Hiccup's face. Every so often he would turn his head and look to either side of the mount for a scaly beast somewhere.

Merida sighed hopelessly and turned forward again. She didn't dare try to distract him now. _However...her eyes veered to the rider behind her again..._He seems a bit too concentrated..._she thought to herself. An evil smile crept onto her face and before anything else could happen, she kicked the sides of the horse and Angus sprinted

forward. Surprised, Hiccup didn't have enough time to react, and he fell off as the steed made a sharp turn through the trees. Flying into the snow, Hiccup could hear the laughter of a certain redhead as she turned the horse, returning to where the viking lay.

"Oh, thank you so much..." retorted Hiccup as he rolled his eyes.

Though Merida couldn't stop laughing, "Sorry." she choked as she held out a hand, helping him back up.

Once he was once again mounted, Merida's giggles had ceased, but her smile didn't remain. Despite her wishes, as soon as Hiccup was on the horse, he snapped back into a focused gaze as he continued his search. With an empty heart, Merida tapped Angus' sides and they continued on.

****Loss****

Stoick sat by the fire, staring into its eternal flames that danced up and over the logs and eventually died in the air above. Sighing, he fingered a small stuffed toy that was only the size of his palm. The house was empty besides him inside. Astrid had been moved to her own house as she was feeling better and preferred not to be reminded of the lost boy she looked for. Stoick, however, refused to leave the house in mourning of his son ever since his announcement in the Great Hall. Spitelout took care of his job as chief while he contained himself.

He continued stroking the little baby dragon plush as giant tears rolled down his face. Occasionally he would glance up the stairs, hoping for a sound of scribbling, or little feet running around, or a voice...

Lowering his head, he dropped the toy on the ground in front of his feet and closed his eyes. He felt the warm tears roll down his cheeks and drip onto the wooden floor around the toy his beloved wife once gave to his son. After a few minutes of simply tears, he picked up the doll again and continued his routine.

"Stoick, ye in here?" Gobber called. The stocky man wiggled himself through the door and his own right peg thunked across the floorboards.

The chief remained silent as his friend limped his way toward him. He didn't even flinch when Gobber accidentally knocked over a couple bottles of mead and a shield. Sighing, the blacksmith groaned as he sat himself next to Stoick, peering over at the dragon toy.

"Stoick..." he started, "It's been weeks. Ah know it takes time to get over it, but the problem is, you're still chief and Spitelout can't keep doin' this for ye forever."

The chief sighed, "Might as well just hand it all over to him, seeing as he still has a breathing son."

Gobber drew his eyes away from the chief. Moments ticked by in silence as the chief just kept lowering his head. More tears made their way down his cheeks and his soft breathing became stuttering

sobs while the blacksmith just stared helplessly.

"Well, now." Gobber said playfully, nudging Stoick's arm, "Ya don't know if he's really d-...not breathing...he may still be out there."

"Gobber..." Stoick's voice changed from mournful to harsh, "Just stop it..." Then he rose and opened the door to leave. But just before he left he turned and whispered, "...it's over...he's gone..."

****Encounter****

The searching pair had been riding for hours, only ever stopping for food or to relieve themselves, otherwise they were continuously looking through and above the landscape. By now, it was dusk and the two had spent the entire day looking for Toothless, the sun falling through the snow and turning the sky orange, then red, the purple, and finally the night began to creep on them.

Merida was quite an amazing girl. She could do practically anything while riding a horse: eat, sing songs, fire arrows...even fall asleep while riding. And that's precisely what she did for a few hours while she and Hiccup continued their search for the long-lost, supposed dragon. Not that the viking noticed, he had his eyes glued to the horizon still clinging to his heartfelt hope. It was only when he realized they were going in circles that he saw her eyelids firmly shut, and a bit of drool crawling down her chin. Rolling his eyes, he tried shaking her arm.

"Merida?"

The redhead gave a small moan, but she just leaned backward, pinning him to the horse. He tried pushing her back up, but he then realized how heavy she really is.

"M-Merida! Wake up!"

This time she stirred and finally opened her eyes. Still half-asleep, she sat herself up and brought Angus to a halt. Blinking away the tiredness, she finally realized her surroundings.

"Oh! Ah'm sorry Hiccup!" rubbing her eyes, she sat up straight, "Ah just sort of dozed off. Sorry, ah should've been watchin'."

"No, it's alright-" but he cut himself off. Lifting his head, he turned every which way.

"No, ah'm serious. This is something important to ye, and-"

"Shh!"

"No ah will not 'shh' because fer once ah have th' opportunity ta help ye, and here ah go fallin' aslee-"

"Quiet!" Merida didn't get to continue her protest as he forcefully covered her mouth. By now her tiredness was completely gone, and she became quite annoyed. Yet she remained still despite this being the one-thousandth time he 'heard something.' She began to feel that this

hope was becoming a false obsession. In truth, she never believed Toothless was ever there. Hiccup had told her that the dragon couldn't fly on his own, and it had been a long time since he arrived on their shores let alone went missing on his homeland. Even if luck was on his side in bringing him safe through the ocean, the chances of someone finding him from so far away was unlikely.

"Hiccup..." she whispered quietly, but he just slid off the horse and walked quietly through the snow. "Hiccup." She called a bit louder, trying hard to get his attention. But he held his hand up to her, concentrating hard on the darkening horizon. He scanned the area, looking for a wing, black scales or even a pair of green eyes. "Hiccup!" Merida too slid off the horse and walked loudly toward the hopeful boy.

"Quiet!" He snapped at her, but she didn't stop. Grabbing his shoulders, she tried to shake him to his senses.

"Hiccup, there is nothin' there!" His loose clothing slid against his skin, but he shrugged her off and continued to look in the distance.

The viking knew she didn't think he was there since they first discussed the matter. Her doubt was obvious, and it showed through their entire one-day journey. But he didn't want to give up. He didn't want to think that his only hope of getting home and seeing Berk, his father, his friends and Astrid was never there. It was a long shot of course, but he still wanted hope. It was the only thing he had left besides an old, fading notebook.

Meanwhile, Merida just continued to stare at him, slightly defeated. He wouldn't listen to her unless she broke his heart and spirit, and that wasn't something she was willing to do. She closed her eyes and gave a heavy sigh. Silently she hoisted herself back on Angus' back and waited for Hiccup to do the same.

"Hiccup," she called, "it's gettin' dark. We should look fer a place ta camp fer th' night."

He didn't move. She sighed again, and clicked Angus forward till he was positioned right next to Hiccup.

"Hey," she said quietly, "He's probably gone down ta sleep now, an' it's be hard ta find him in th' dark. We'll find him tomorrow."

He still didn't move. Merida waited a few minutes, then decided to try to snap him back again. But as she began to swing her leg over the horse, Hiccup turned his head swiftly to the right. Noticing his sudden movement, she froze, still halfway on the horse.

"Did you hear that?" He took a small step in the snow.

"No." retorted Merida.

"I know what you're thinking, but I really did hear something. Just...just listen."

Sighing, Merida relaxed her body and lifted her head, hoping some noise will come to her ears besides the soft wind that blew the powdery snow. To her surprise, she did hear something. Was it

growling?

Slowly, she reached for the broadsword that swung along her leg the entire trip. She didn't unsheathe it completely, out of respect for Hiccup and his desire to find his dragon, but she lifted it somewhat from its sheathe.

Suddenly, they heard a snap from behind them, and Merida and Hiccup both turned to find a pair of glowing eyes staring right at them.

16. Chapter 16

****Found****

There was only a small hint of hope. A small flicker of hope that quickly died within a split second. Hiccup's heart sunk all the way to his feet. Yes, they saw a pair of big, glowing eyes, but they were blue, not green. And the body they were attached to was covered in dirty, black fur with a few broken arrows sticking out of its right shoulder.

No doubt, this was the beast that had attacked Merida's home, but it was obvious this was not Toothless as Hiccup had hoped. Instead, a black wolf that was much larger than a normal sized wolf stood before them.

Hiccup stood perfectly still as the massive wolf crept closer and closer. Merida tried to unsheathe her sword as slowly as possible, but Angus was becoming more and more edgy as the wolf made its way through the snow. In the depleting light of dusk, it was hard to tell who exactly it was going for, but she could see its eyes glancing between the horse and the skinny viking.

Suddenly, the wolf lunged, aiming for the skittish horse, but Angus kicked off, spraying snow everywhere. The wolf missed its target and latched its claws onto Merida's cloak. Angus had sprinted off, frightened, but Merida was pulled into the snow, her broadsword still strapped to her hip.

"Merida!" Hiccup cried as he dove through the snow to help her. Meanwhile, Merida was flailing around, trying to get her cloak off her shoulders. Luckily, the wolf managed to get his claw tangled in the heavy material, preventing him from swiping at them too much.

Finally, Merida pulled herself free and she quickly jumped to her feet, pulling out the sword she had been yearning to get out.

"Run, Hiccup!" she yelled as she swung at the beast. The wolf pulled its claws from the cloak and backed away from the redhead.

Hiccup didn't want to leave her alone, but he knew he would be of no help. He had no weapons and there was no way he could fight this gigantic creature with his bare hands. Still, there must be a way he can help.

Ignoring her order, he found a large stick deep under the snow, and helped Merida in attacking the beast.

The wolf growled and bared his yellow teeth, revealing a few bloody stains. Probably the remains of a previous kill. The pair only hoped it was not human blood.

The duo continued to swing at the monster as it circled them and occasionally swung back. Finally, it lunged again, but this time at Merida since she seemed to be the larger threat of the two. She ducked, but unfortunately it caught her wild curls and she was dragged back to the ground.

Hiccup took his opportunity and smashed his stick against the wolf's temple. A bit dazed, it staggered, still dragging Merida in its claws. She cried out in pain and tried to twist herself to cut the wolf's leg, but she only ended up throwing her sword which nearly hit Hiccup's leg.

Hiccup struck again, this time under its jaw, but it left no lasting damage. It tried to swing at Hiccup, but it tripped over Merida and fell into the snow right next to her. Hiccup quickly picked up the sword and pointed it at the wolf who released the girl and advanced on him.

Despite years of working in a smithy, the sword was still a bit heavy for the scrawny viking and he clumsily swung at the beast. It dodged and swiped at him, scratching his forearm.

The viking cried out in pain and dropped the sword. The wolf would have bit his head off then if it hadn't been for Merida who jumped on its back and tried to pull it to the ground. But she underestimated its strength and it rolled around trying to get her off. Smashing her into the earth, she tried to gasp for breath as she became surrounded in snow and matted fur. Hiccup once again picked up the sword with his left hand, while his other bleeding hand was clenched in pain.

He swung at the wolf, making it leap to its feet, but it still paid little attention to him. It merely swatted at him, knocking him over again, then advanced on the princess, sinking its teeth into her arm. She screamed, tensing up her muscles and closing her eyes shut to the the blood that began to stain her sleeve. The black wolf then threw her through the snow where she landed, still screaming and clutching her arm.

Hiccup had quickly recovered and stood at the ready. His arm still stung, but he put both hands tightly around the handle this time. Now the wolf had turned its attention on Hiccup as the Scott was now injured enough.

The beast snapped and clawed, all the while the boy only managing to block its attacks with the sword. Finally, Hiccup injured its paw as it tried to scratch him again, its red blood falling into the snow. But it didn't even give a whimper. Snarling, the wolf snapped again, then lunged for the boy.

Off balance, Hiccup stumbled backwards. The wolf then tackled him completely to the ground. Raising his arms, Hiccup attempted to protect his face and neck from the continuously snapping wolf. Not long after, its teeth sank into his hand as it did to Merida's arm. Giving a loud cry, he let go of the broadsword and tried to hit the

wolf in some way with his other hand. It let go of his hand, but prepared for another attack.

In that split second, Hiccup knew he would surely die. He was defenseless, and all he could do for those few milliseconds before the teeth reached his face was think. Think how he would never see his father or his friends again, how he would never feel Berk's ocean breeze again, how he would never enjoy another Snoggletog again, and how it was all his fault. It was his fault for convincing Merida to come all the way out here, it was his fault for not bringing another weapon, and it was his fault Toothless was lost, if not dead.

Now he could feel the wolf's hot breath. That's it. He will die here. He waited for and somewhat welcomed the end.

But it didn't come.

Hiccup looked up to see the wolf gone. A bit confused he looked over to see the beast fighting with something else. But it wasn't human. It was black and large, like the wolf. Then he saw a pair of wings flair out from its back.

"Toothless?" Hiccup sat up a bit, cradling his bloody hand.

Yes, there was no doubt about it. The flashing, cat-like green eyes, the loud screeching, and the occasional blasts of purple flame.

Hiccup stood up quickly, staring at his long-lost friend. Toothless must have tackled the wolf away from him just before it almost killed him. Still shocked, Hiccup just stared at the fighting animals, watching patiently as the dragon easily forced the wolf away into a retreat.

Triumphant, the dragon gave a loud roar as the wolf ran away. Once it was out of sight, he turned his green eyes to the viking who simply stared in amazement. It wasn't until his eyes blurred from tears that he decided to greet his friend.

"Toothless!" he cried, running as fast as he could through the snow. The dragon returned his welcome by leaping and bounding toward him as well. His feral eyes had dilated to his familiar, excited mood. Hiccup wrapped his arms around the dragon's neck, but Toothless pounded him into the ground with his momentum. Overwhelmed in happiness, Toothless nuzzled and licked the boy's face while Hiccup just laughed and cried. It was a while before either of them finally caught their breath.

Still laughing, Hiccup stood up and wrapped his arms around the dragon's neck again.

"I missed you, buddy."

He squeezed tighter around his neck, too afraid to let go. This was it. The moment he had been waiting for for months. The moment he feared would never happen. Finally he let go and just looked at his friend.

"Hah! I can't believe you're here! How- how- how did you find me?" He tried to circle around the dragon to see its tail, but Toothless was

still too excited.

"Woah! Hold still, bud!" Ducking under his wing, he caught sight of the old, self-use prosthetic he made for Toothless the previous winter. Unfortunately, the dragon thought he was playing and tackled him to the ground again.

The viking's laughing continued as he playfully tried to push off the dragon. "Ha ha! I'm glad to see you too, bud!" They continued to play, Hiccup trying to get up, only to be pushed back down, neither caring about anything else in the world.

"So, ah gather this is Toothless?"

Both of them stopped in the tracks and looked over to see the redhead slowly walking toward them. Merida was happy to see them together, but she still carried a look of worry. She had never seen a dragon before, and there's no telling if it would attack her, even if it was Hiccup's friend.

"Yeah." said Hiccup, finally getting up. Toothless moved over to this new person, curious and wary at the same time. Hiccup moved his way to Merida first and gestured over to Toothless. "Merida, Toothless. Toothless, Merida." He gestured back at the girl.

She took a small step backward as the creature made its way closer to her.

"It's okay, Merida." Hiccup reassured, "Here." he grabbed her hand and tried to lift it, but she jerked back.

"Ow!"

"Sorry, I forgot." Her arm was still covered in blood and the open teeth wounds were clearly visible. He took her other hand and held it out to Toothless.

"Wha-? What are ye doin'?" Merida tried to pull her hand back, but Hiccup held it firm this time.

"Shh! It's alright." He made her take a step closer to the dragon.

Before she knew it the black beast was right at her fingertips. She shivered a bit as it sniffed the blood on her hand, then pressed its nose against her palm.

"Do you feel that?" he asked, releasing her hand and allowing her to feel the connection. She nodded slowly. "That's him trusting you."

Toothless pulled away and sniffled a bit at the blood that was left on his muzzle.

"Wow." said Merida as Hiccup moved his way around Toothless to give him a well-deserved neck scratch. Toothless hummed at all the attention and leaned into the hard scratches. "Looks like he found ye jus' in time." she moved to the dragon's other side and slowly rubbed his scaly neck.

"Yeah, call it luck, I guess."

"Or fate." Merida smiled at him over the beast's large hide. She then turned all her attention to the dragon and scratched harder on his neck with her one good arm. Toothless purred and stretched, but all of a sudden he fell to the earth as Merida moved her hand under his jaw.

Surprised, she jumped back. "Wh-what did ah do?"

Hiccup couldn't help but burst out laughing. Unfortunately it only earned a glare from the princess. Once he finally caught his breath, Toothless got back up and moved over to Merida, purring and rubbing his face all over her. At first she tried to move away, but her hesitant nature turned into giggles and laughs as she played with the giant creature.

"Hey, now!" Hiccup called, "You can't just replace me that quickly!" and he jumped on Toothless' back, trying to pull him to the ground, but the dragon was unfazed, and only rolled over and playfully pawed at him.

The three of them played for what seemed like hours, the dragon pawing or rubbing on the other two while they tackled and scratched him. After they finally stopped, Hiccup sat in the snow and realized how similarly they played with Toothless to how they fought the wolf.

"So, what now?" Merida said, plopping herself down as Toothless cuddled next to Hiccup.

"Actually, I have no idea." Hiccup looked up to the sky. "Unless they already caught it, the hunting party is still out looking for the wolf, and that puts Toothless in danger." He patted his friend's head.

"Aye," Merida sighed, "Well, how's yer hand doin'? Ah can see it's still covered in blood."

The viking lifted his left hand, "Oh, I actually forgot about it."

Merida rolled her eyes then stood to retrieve the satchel she had been carrying. It had been thrown off after Angus ran off. As she walked back, she pulled out a few small bandages, a cloth and a water bag.

"Here." she said, grabbing his hand. "Now, this won't hurt." and she opened the bladder and poured some of the water onto his hand, right after taking the cloth and pressing it to his wound.

"Ow!" he cried, trying to pull his hand back. "You said it wouldn't hurt!"

"I lied." she retorted as she continued to treat his open wound. After cleaning it out as best she could in the now darkened night, she wrapped his hand. "There."

"Thanks. Now let's get your arm."

"No, yer arm is still scratched up."

"Yeah, it'll heal. Come on, I know how hard that wolf bites, now give me your arm."

"Hiccup, Ah'll be fine!"

"No, you won't! It needs to be taken care of now."

While they argued, Toothless covered his ears, annoyed by the loud teens. Eventually Hiccup managed to convince Merida that her injury was more severe, and he began to treat her by carefully ripping her sleeve at the elbow, and pulling it away from the torn skin. Using the remaining water, he cleaned out her wound and wrapped it as she did for him. After he was done, she went to retrieve her torn cloak and tried to hide herself from the cold as best she could.

"So..." she started, "What exactly are we goin' ta do about him?" she nodded over at the dragon who was now trying to find the best shelter from the cold.

"Like I said, I don't know. I mean, no offense, but I don't think taking him to see your parents is the best idea. But I can't leave him alone."

"Ah understand." she gave him a small smile.

"Plus, I'm pretty sure your mom has noticed by now that we're missing, which means we have a second hunting party on our tails."

"Aye...So then what's yer plan of action?"

"I just said I didn't know!"

Merida sighed, she could tell he was distressed.

"Ah suppose, it's time fer ye ta go then." she said quietly. He looked over at her. "Well, ye need ta go back home sometime, an' ah'm sure Toothless wants ta go back too."

"Well, yeah. But-"

"An' ye don't have ta go right away," she interrupted, "ye could let him rest a bit, gather some materials first. But...ah have ta go back."

"Well, you could stay with us till we leave."

"No," she gave a heavy sigh, "no ah can't. Ah need ta go back, let my mum know ah'm safe and yer safe, and maybe get th' huntin' party away from ye."

Hiccup stared at her in disbelief. He didn't want her to leave. Not yet anyway. Toothless had only just met her and despite his great want to go home, he wanted to see more of Scotland.

He sighed. But there was really no other option.

"Fine," he said, "but on one condition."

****A Worried Mother****

Elinor watched the window constantly. She watched as the sun fell below the horizon, till its light made the snow glow in colors of orange and yellow in the morn. Lady MacGuffin had tried to coax her away from the window and get some rest, but she refused. As soon as she found out Merida and Hiccup were missing she sent guards to go out and look for them. She had eaten some, but her stomach turned and gurgled from sickness. Though she passed it off to everyone else as frustration with her daughter. Somehow, she knew something like this would happen, she just hoped with all her heart it wouldn't.

"Oh Elinor," sighed Muireall, "you of all people should know she'll be fine."

"It's different this time." The Queen spoke quietly.

"Well, you let her go out when Mor'du was about."

"Yes, but she doesn't know these woods as well as back home." She turned her eyes away from the window and strode around the room. "For all we know, she could be lost an' cold an' scared."

"Now, now." Muireall sat down in a chair by the warm, hearty fire. "She took someone with her, remember? That boy she brought. An' even if she were alone, I doubt very much that she'd let herself feel scared...Just like you." she looked up at the Queen who stopped for a second, then continued to pace.

She knew she was scared, she was terrified. At least with Mor'du they knew exactly what it was and what it looked like. This is a beast they had never seen, and they don't know how strong it is. Sighing, she sat down in the chair in front of Lady MacGuffin. In truth, she wanted to go out looking for Merida with all the guards she sent, but what example would that set for her daughter?

After a few moments of contemplating and inner thoughts, there came a knock at the door. Hopeful, the Queen rushed to the door and opened it. In front of her stood a pair of guards and a young redhead.

"Merida!" she exclaimed as she embraced her daughter. After a few moments, she pulled away to look at her daughter. "Are you alright? You shouldn't have done that! You had me worried sick!"

"Ah know, mum. Ah'm sorry."

"Oh dear! What happened to your arm?" Elinor took notice of her daughter's ripped sleeve and the staining bandage.

"We sort of ran into th' beast." Merida gave a apprehensive smile, but it dropped when her mother's worried look only exaggerated. "It was a wolf." the princess tried to push away the matter as quickly as possible. "An unusual, large, black wolf. Hiccup an' ah injured it, but it's still out there somewhere."

"Oh. Well, where is Hiccup?" Elinor saw that he wasn't there among them.

"He's gone." Merida looked down, showing a bit of remorse.

Elinor looked over at Muireall, who gasped and rushed over. Swallowing hard, the queen lifted her daughter's chin to see her eyes.

"Was it the wolf, dear?"

"Oh! No, sorry mum. He's not dead." A wave of relief swept over the entire room, Lady MacGuffin taking a few deep breaths to steady herself. "No. After we encountered th' wolf. We...bumped into a traveller who was an old friend of Hiccup's an' he took him home."

The Queen raised her eyebrows. "So soon? They could have come and stayed for a bit-"

"No, they had ta leave right away." Merida looked sternly into her mother's eyes, then looked down.

Elinor sighed, then put an arm around her daughter. "I'm sorry dear. I know the two of you were good friends."

"It's alright." Merida said, giving a half-smile.

"Well, let's go take care of that arm now." she said, trying to change the subject and led her daughter away.

****Late That Night****

All was quiet in the house of MacGuffin. Elinor, Muireall, Sorch, the triplets and Merida all sat in the study as the fireplace began to die down. Resting her head on her mother's knee, Merida sat on the floor reading a fiction book aloud as her mother continued one of her sewing projects. The boys had decided it would be fun to act out what Merida was reading, though after hours of doing that already, their heads began to droop. Sorch was sitting properly in a chair by the fire, watching the flames as she listened to Merida's story as her mother sat next to Elinor, writing a few letters on a small table.

"...The selkie hunter stepped towards the edge and peered over to see what it was that the stranger was pointing at..." Merida continued, "...The hunter was scared, because he was still in the form of a selkie, and how could he return home like that?*"..."

She was mid-sentence when suddenly, the door burst open and a group of men filed in.

"Where's Merida?!" huffed the King as he stumbled in with everyone. Catching sight of his daughter, he ran in and picked her up by her shoulders and hugged her with all his strength. "Oh, why did ye go out there lass?"

Merida struggled hard to breathe, but her father's grip was a death trap. Finally, he let her go and she was able to catch her breath.

"We found yer horse! It was being hunted by th' beast, but when we saw ye weren't there, ah began to worry!" He hugged her again, "Then

we found a bloody sleeve in th' middle of th' forest an' ah could only assume th' worst!"

"Dad! Ah'm fine! Stop choking me!" She felt like her lungs were collapsing.

He let her go again, then moved the hair from her face to ensure she was telling the truth.

"Oh, thank th' stars." He sighed from satisfaction. "Well, tonight we feast! We killed the beast!" The room erupted with cheers, and everyone filed out of the small study. While everyone cheered and shouted, Merida's stomach turned to nervousness and dread, but a wave of relief swept over her as soon as she saw the head of the wolf poking out from under a thick tarp. Its eyes were empty and the tarp was covered in blood.

Though it was late, the house of MacGuffin was filled with guests as everyone celebrated the death of the beast. There was much drinking and dancing, but Merida retreated back to the study where she closed the door and waited for all the noise to die down.

As soon as it was all silent, she crept out and began making preparations. Grabbing a large sack, she filled it with food, water and all manner of supplies then quietly snuck out the back door. Luckily, it was still dark out, probably early morning. The bag was heavy, but it still wasn't too big. Crunching in the snow, she tried to make her way to the stables. But she stopped suddenly when she heard someone call her name from behind her. She turned to see Cathal coming toward her.

"Where are ye goin'?" He asked.

"Ta see Hiccup." she said, setting the sack down.

"Yer mum told me he went home."

"Not yet. Ah'm goin' ta send him off."

He nodded slowly. "So...he really did find his dragon?"

She smiled, "Aye. Why don't ye come with me? Ye could come see him."

He shook his head. "No, ah better stay. Who else is goin' ta give ye a cover story?"

She nodded and swung the sack back over her shoulder.

"Tell him ah said hello, fer me." She nodded again. "An' that ah'll miss him."

Her smile faded just before she turned to the stables. When she looked back he was already heading back inside. Sighing, she picked out a saddle and a horse and made her way into the forest again. She decided not to take Angus since she had already rode him to death, plus he was being chased by a wolf during the night. Instead she took the horse Hiccup rode on the way to the MacGuffins', Eacharn.

Following the trees she had marked earlier, Merida and Eacharn casually made their way through the forest. Finally, they came across a small ditch with a few logs covered in snow stretched across. She dismounted and tied the horse to a small tree and grabbed the sack she brought with her. Looking in, she could see something large and scaly taking deep breaths.

"Hiccup?" she whispered. She saw the mass turn and stir till a scrawny boy climbed out from underneath it. After he climbed out the ditch, the dragon shook off the snow that fell on him and climbed out as well to stretch his shoulders.

"Glad you came." Hiccup said after a long yawn. Obviously he and Toothless had taken a nap after she left before.

"Well, that was yer condition." she said, smiling softly as she handed him the bag. "Ah tried ta get as much as ah could in there. It took him this long ta find ye, who knows how long before ye get home."

"Well, food shouldn't be a problem. Toothless can hunt fish for the two of us, and just as long as we can find a spot with fresh water everyday, we should be fine."

She nodded slowly and after a few moments of silence, she looked up to the sky.

"It'll be dawn soon." she said, tracing the stars with her blue eyes.

"Yeah...we should probably go before light. Toothless would stand out too much in this snow..."

Merida silently nodded again, then looked over at Hiccup. She wanted to say something, but a knot made its way into her throat. She hated saying goodbye. And she never really had to before. Her family never left her, and she didn't have many friends growing up, if any at all.

Hiccup didn't know what to say either. He was always awkward in these situations. He tried to avoid eye contact as much as possible and fiddle with whatever was in his hands, which happened to be the sack Merida gave him. Trying to be as casual as he could, he carried the bag over to Toothless and secured it onto his back. The dragon groaned under the new weight, but he had been through worse, so there wasn't much to complain about. After he was done, Hiccup turned back to Merida.

"So...I-I guess I'll...see you later." Hiccup really had no idea what he was saying.

"You promise?" Merida became hopeful now.

"Well...yeah, sure. I mean, why wouldn't I..."

She wasn't very convinced. Sure, she believed he might come back to visit someday, but she wanted a promise. Suddenly she had an idea. From under her dress she pulled a necklace and pulled it over her head. It was the necklace she commissioned Hiccup to make.

"My mum had me hold onto this. She said she gave it ta me before fer a reason. Ah still don't know why though." she fingered it carefully, turning it over in her palm. "Here." she said handing it out to him.

Hiccup was a bit taken back. "What? No, I can't take something so important."

"Well, if ye really are gonna come back, ah won't have anythin' ta worry about."

He shook his head and took a step back. "No, it's too precious. To you and your mother."

"An' without ye, we would probably still be at home, not talkin' ta each other." As she spoke, she walked toward him and put it around his neck. "But it's not forever. Ye have ta promise me ta return it sometime."

He smiled and tucked it under his shirt. "Okay. I promise."

She smiled back, then stepped back to allow him to mount Toothless. "Ye better get goin'."

"Right..." and he climbed on the dragon's back right in front of the bag he just put on.

"Cathal says hi." she said quickly before he sped off. "And...and we're goin' ta miss ye..."

"Why?" Hiccup said dumbly, "I'll be coming back right?"

They laughed a good hearty laugh. They made sure it was a good laugh, for neither knew when they would ever laugh with one another again. After they were done, they gave each other one last look, one last nod, one last goodbye. Then the great beast lifted its wings and jumped off into the air, the darkness swallowing their shadows.

****Home****

It was still late winter in Berk. Only a few dragons were flying outside and there was still a great amount of ice and snow all over the island. Astrid had recovered from her journey and was at the moment helping to calm a group of Gronckles near the Great Hall. Meanwhile, the chief took to helping the fishing boats. Though no matter what he did or where he was, he was constantly reminded of his son. Any dragon that flew by reminded him of Hiccup, every child that cried reminded him, every clang of metal, even the harsh wind that howled made Stoick's mind turn to his son.

The chief helped to unload one of the boats while some men clamored aboard to start repairing it. According to one of the men, they were attacked by a Scauldron while out at sea. Looking at the ripped sails and the still steaming deck, he ran over him mind what else he had to do that day: There was a meeting with the elder and some of the men concerning the planting season, the teens had an idea about dragon stables, he still had to take Thornado out flying for the day, and there was also-

"What is that?"

Stoick quickly looked around to see who had asked the question, but he saw all the men's attention on the horizon. Fixing his gaze, the chief narrowed his eyes and he saw a small speck in the sky flying toward them. At first, he was about to dismiss it as just another dragon, but he noticed, as all the other men did, that it was flying straight for Berk, and at a very high speed.

The chief moved his way to the end of the dock, pushing aside some of the men in the process. As it approached, he could make out wings. Yes, there was no doubt about it, it was a dragon. But the color; it was black. And the only dragon they knew of that had such a complexion was...

"Hiccup?" Stoick was leaning so far in now that he almost fell into the water.

But at last, all his anticipation, all the suspense was gone. There it was: A Night Fury with a skinny, brown-haired boy riding on top of it. The entire dock erupted with shouts and cheers, and before anyone knew it, so did the entire island. The swift dragon streamed above their heads and landed right in the middle of the village where everyone swarmed to welcome him home.

Stoick ran as fast as he could, which was surprisingly fast for someone so big, and pushed away as many people as he could with his large arms. When he finally reached his son, the crowd gave them some space. However the chief was in such shock, that he barely even moved once he was finally in eye-contact with his son.

"Hi...dad." said Hiccup with a smile.

Teary eyed and laughing, the great chief picked up his son with both arms as he did when Hiccup was just a babe and lifted him high in the air just before giving him a giant hug.

"My son!" he cried, "My son is alive! He's home!"

The island gave three loud cheers then melted into cries and jeers. Next thing he knew after nearly being strangled by his dad, Hiccup was surrounded by his friends; the twins, Fishlegs, even Snotlout seemed happy to see him. Then a sharp pain hit Hiccup's upper arm, and he turned to see Astrid. He could tell she was so happy to see him, but she was trying to hide it with anger.

"You stupid idiot!" she grumbled at him. Then she proceeded to give him a kiss and hugged him before he could respond in any way.

The day proceeded as the night Hiccup left Scotland. The entire village danced and drank to the sudden return, no one caring for what may come the next day. No one even minded the obnoxiously loud singing of Gobber, who pranced all around the Great Hall to his tunes.

Meanwhile across the sea, a young princess awaited the return of a friend. Little did she know she wasn't to see him again for years...

*Story of a Selkie as told by Tom Muir

17. Chapter 17

4 Years Later

Yes. It had been 4 years since Hiccup's adventure in Scotland. Four long years on Berk and he had long since forgotten the promise he made so long ago.

He was now 21 years old, but he was still too skinny for his height. Indeed, he had more muscle than before, but his stature wasn't the most praised on the tiny island. No, such a title still belonged to his father, who had recently given up the title of 'chief' to his highly respected son.

Stoick had been thinking of turning over the chieftainship to his son for years now, but Hiccup had been too evasive on the matter. It was only until recently that he finally gave in to his father's request. So now the young adult was in charge of a village and he could only be so excited over this new responsibility. Though he was an adult and more mature than his usual childish self, he had no idea how to be a good chief.

Sure, he could serve his people well, but he couldn't make a speech, much less give one effectively to his people in any circumstance. He also messed up countless times at weddings and the officiating of children into the tribe. His pride was saved, however, since his father was still there to help him.

It was now morning on Berk, and it was still too early for any viking to be awake, except for one. Since he was so busy the rest of the day, Hiccup took to flying Toothless earlier in the morning, but that still didn't sit well with the dragon.

Still droopy-eyed and yawning, Hiccup fastened on his flying gear as he tried to awaken the sleeping dragon under his window.

"C'mon, Toothless." He said, shaking the Night Fury's head with his foot. But the dragon grumbled and knocked his foot away. "Hey, if you wanna fly at all today, then you better get up." He said, sitting back on his bed to readjust his prosthetic.

The dragon grumbled louder, then shifted so his back was to the viking. Still tired, Hiccup reached for his pillow and threw it at the dragon.

"C'mon! Let's go!"

The pillow made little to no impact, but it produced just enough force to annoy the dragon. Half yawning, half growling, Toothless stretched and clawed at the floorboards.

"Yeah, I know the feeling. Remember when it was you waking me up?" Hiccup talked as he grabbed the saddle he needed. "You were so noisy and loud, and you wouldn't give in!" He strapped on the saddle and adjusted the dragon's prosthetic. "A bit different on the other side, huh?" Playfully, he nudged the top of Toothless' head and headed downstairs.

His father was still asleep in his bed, but that didn't keep Hiccup from being loud as he bounded down the stairs and grabbed a small snack for him and Toothless before their flight. Stoick could sleep through anything unless someone called "Dragon Raid!"

Tossing a few fish into the mouth of his friend, Hiccup bit down on a small piece of bread and walked out, Toothless stumbling behind him. Outside, they could see it was still dark out, so not even the fishermen were up. Breathing in the cool air, Hiccup gave his body one final stretch then climbed aboard on Toothless' back.

"You ready?" he said, patting his neck.

The dragon yawned and stretched out its wings to its full span, reaching out and above them, and then, to annoy his rider, shot off into the air without warning.

Hiccup was thrown back by the force of it all, but his prosthetic was already strapped in, so he didn't fall off. Grunting, he pulled himself forward against the wind and grabbed onto the front of the saddle.

"Thanksâ€¦!" he said sarcastically when they finally smoothed out into a glide. But he couldn't stay annoyed for long, especially when they had an entire sky to explore. They dived and soared through the darkened clouds, occasionally going at such a high speed that they seemed to rip through the atmosphere.

Hiccup laughed and jeered as Toothless roared and flamed, the two having the time of their lives. But unfortunately, all good things come to an end. Their hearts dropped when they noticed the big flaming ball rising out of the horizon. Groaning and murmuring, they landed back on Berk.

By the time they got back to the house, it was full morning and they flew over the fishing boats that hauled in their first nets. When they landed, Skull Crusher walked over to Hiccup, expecting food.

Skull Crusher was a dragon Stoick had given his trust to only a little after Hiccup returned from Scotland. He was large and red with small eyes and wide nostrils. The old chief had taken him in when he followed Fishlegs and Meatlug back to Berk. He became Stoick's only dragon when Thornado died in an avalanche just last winter.

Hungry, the heavy dragon nipped Hiccup's hand.

"Hey, if you really want food, go eat with the other dragons!" he said, pulling his hand away and pointing toward the feeding station. It was located near the stables, which Hiccup and Fishlegs came up with for the dragons. There they could sleep and do whatever they wished without being disturbed too much, but not every dragon felt the need to stay there. Toothless, for instance, stayed in Hiccup's house.

Grumbling, Skull Crusher waddled away to eat, Toothless following him. Hungry himself, Hiccup went inside to find his dad cooking a porridge of some sort. As his dad worked, he went upstairs and removed some of his riding gear, leaving his lightweight leather armor and tunic on underneath. When he was done, he started to head

back only to be stopped by his dad at the bottom of the stairs.

"Son, we need to talk." Stoick said slowly.

Hiccup's heart dropped. He knew what was coming, and of all the things he had to deal with for the day, this was not one of them.

"Oookay, but first I need to go see uh- the twins! About the uhâ€|race tomorrow and-"

"Hiccup, listen to me." Stoick ignored his son's protests and guided/shoved him to a chair.

Once he was seated, Hiccup stopped talking, but he felt and looked as uncomfortable as ever.

"Son, you've been chief for a while now- a really good chief, andâ€|I'm sure by now you've realized there are certain responsibilities." Stoick took a deep breath. "You've done a good job in upholding all of themâ€|except one."

Hiccup placed his hands on his face. Obviously he didn't want to be there, but that didn't stop Stoick.

"You're of age, and now that you're chiefâ€|everyone, not just me, think it's high time that youâ€|get marriedâ€|have children."

"Got to go!" Hiccup rushed out of his seat and past his father. He didn't want to listen any more.

"Hiccup!" Stoick growled just before he reached the door. "It's your duty to your people to produce an heir. If not, then we'd have to look to Snotlout."

"Dadâ€|" the new chief whined, "he's just about as far from that as I am. And besides, there's too muchâ€|we'll talk later!" Without another word, he went out, slamming the door behind him.

"Hiccup!" Stoick called, but by the time he opened the door after his son, the chief was already in the village. Sighing, he closed the door and finished his breakfast.

Meanwhile, Hiccup walked briskly down the path towards Gobber's shop. Unfortunately his hunger returned as he passed the bakery, and he remembered he skipped his breakfast to avoid his father. Sighing, he kept walking and made it to the old smithy. He could see the small crowd of people who got there early, knowing their service numbers were close. Gobber was already there as usual, trying to get a helmet unstuck from a saddle. Normally Hiccup would ask about the story behind such an odd occurrence, but he kept silent.

"You're early. Even for you, that's strange." Gobber said as Hiccup took off his leather armor and put on his old apron.

"I skipped breakfast." Hiccup went over into the back and put some finishing touches on a saddle someone requested the day before.

"Hmm. That's even stranger." The old blonde grunted as he tried even harder to pull out the horns in the saddle. Unfortunately it only separated the helmet from the horns. "So I guess Stoick gave ye th' talk then."

Hiccup scoffed. "For the tenth timeâ€|Hey, is Yobbish here? His saddle's done."

"Eh, he can pick it up later. The best thing you can do for now is just tell him 'Okay, I'll get on it.' and I'm sure he'll leave you alone for a while."

"I did that the first time he asked me about it. And no, it didn't help. Number 28!" he called out the window, placing the saddle under a desk. "And besides, I know by now that he won't stop until I satisfy his demands."

"Well, go ahead and satisfy them!"

"Gobber! It's not that easy! Twenty-eight!"

"Sure it is. Almost every woman in the village would be willing to marry Chief Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, Slayer of the Red Death and Master of Dragons!"

"Well, that's not what I want."

"What's not what you want?" said a voice behind him. Hiccup turned to see Astrid at the window.

"Oh, hey Astrid! W-what are you doing here so early?"

"I'm number 28." She smirked as she held up her wooden card with the runic symbols written on it. After she handed it to Hiccup she hoisted her own saddle over the window. "I just need some fixing. Some of Stormfly's pins ripped the side, and the handlebars are loose."

Hiccup lifted the saddle up, examining the rips and tears before taking it into the back room.

"So," she continued as she walked through the side door, "what's got you so huffy today?"

"Oh, just a discussion with my dad..." He grabbed a small piece of leather and measured a patch over the saddle.

"A discussion or an argument?" Astrid lifted herself onto an empty bench, letting her legs dangle.

"A one-sided conversation that resulted in me out the door as soon as possible."

"Oh really? About what?" She picked up a small tool sitting in a box. She had no idea what it was for, but she stopped questioning everything in that smithy a long time ago. Whatever it was it clicked as she spun a small lever around her finger.

"The usual." He started cutting the leather and punching holes where he would sew the patch on the saddle.

"Well that's ambiguous."

"It's...more of a personal matter."

She raised an eyebrow to him, but she just threw down the strange tool and got off the bench. "Well, since you're being boring and Gobber is never any fun, I guess I'll go fly Toothless."

"I already flew him today."

"Yeah, but knowing him, he'd want to fly some more. So I'll just pick up the saddle later when I need to take care of Stormfly." she started to walk out the door, but stopped and turned back to him. "Oh and...we'll need to talk about that 'other thing' later. Okay?"

Hiccup stopped working for a bit. His expression didn't change, but his hands showed hesitation. "M'kay." he finally responded quietly.

Nodding, she went out to find where the curious Night Fury had gone to. Gobber watched her as she left, keeping an eye on her.

"Ya know," he said when she was out of ear-shot. "She almost died trying to find you."

"Yes, thank you for reminding me...again..."

"I'm just saying. Astrid's young, strong, smart. She'd make a worthy companion."

Hiccup didn't say anything. He just remained silent as he kept working on the saddle.

"She's probably the best candidate of all the women in the village."

Hiccup still didn't say anything but Gobber could tell his hands begun moving faster and working harder.

"She'd make a good wife."

"Yes, Gobber. She would." His response was harsh and the annoyance in his voice was evident. Letting the subject go, Gobber continued on in his own work, but he paused for a moment as he realized; hidden under that sharp tongue of annoyance, he could sense...sadness.

****Fire****

Astrid flew over the scattered islands with Toothless, the two of them gliding gently through the sky. Though he didn't get to zip and cut through the clouds as he does with Hiccup, the dragon enjoyed flying with Astrid. When they first started this routine of Astrid flying him instead of Hiccup, Toothless was restless and begged Astrid to dive or roll or something he loved to do, but he learned to just take what he had after Astrid refused to fly with him at all for a few days.

Though one thing he could do with the young woman was reach great speeds. She too loved to see how fast he could go with the wind splitting her ears and biting her face. Occasionally they would spring upward then down to the earth to achieve the greatest speed they could get. It was never as fast as it was with Hiccup, but they both still loved it.

Breathing in the cool air, Astrid leaned her head back and let her hair flow back in a braid. After inhaling as much air as she could, she let it out slowly, allowing the world to disappear around her. But she was called back to earth by Toothless who grunted out of boredom. Sighing, she patted his neck.

"I know what you're thinking, but take my word for it: Enjoy it while it lasts."

The dragon grumbled again as a response, but he was still bored.

"You may not realize it now, but things are going to be very different soon."

He gurgled a bit in his throat, but he didn't question her. How could he? He's a dragon.

They flew for a bit more, but soon the dragon became all too annoyed with the slow-paced flying and tried to dive. Astrid dove a lot with Stormfly, but she still wasn't quite used to the sharp dives of a Night Fury. Yelling and screaming at the dragon, Astrid pulled back on the saddle, trying to relieve the dive a bit.

"Hey! Do you want to stop? Because I swear on Loki, we'll go home and you won't get to fly like this for a week!"

The dragon growled from under her then broke out into the usual glide. But the viking's temper hadn't boiled down.

"Okay, that is the second time today. One more and I'll dump you on that island over there."

The dragon saw the island she was talking about, but then his nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed. Being behind his head, Astrid was oblivious to the sudden change. The dragon dove again, though with a more gradual slope than before, to gain speed. The viking was thrown back, not expecting him to rebel so soon.

"Alright! That's it! If you want-" but she stopped herself.

As Toothless flew around the island they saw, she spotted a large amount of black smoke that trailed down from a ship. Hurriedly they rushed for the boat, ready to help anyone in danger. As they approached the ship, Astrid could tell it was not of any of the nearby tribes, or of vikings for that matter. It was wider, taller and had a large deck. Blowing away the smoke with his wings, Toothless landed on the burning wood. Astrid jumped off and looked for anyone around, but there was no one. It seemed the entire crew had abandoned ship. Just in case, Astrid lifted the hatch for the deck below, but as soon as she did, a great amount of heat and smoke rose up and attacked her eyes and lungs.

Stepping back, she coughed and tried to mount Toothless. There was no one to help and if they stayed there any longer, they would be enveloped in flames. But the dragon kept sniffing around despite the great amount of heat waves and smoke.

"C'mon! Let's go, there's no one here!" Astrid was almost completely on the dragon, but she was flung back when he leaped forward and down below deck. She didn't dare follow him with all that filled the area. It was only momentarily before he came back up, but he walked backwards as he dragged something from his mouth. No, not something. Someone.

Coughing, she grabbed whoever it was and threw them over Toothless' back before mounting herself. Without another thought they leaped off into the air, happy to be free of that smoke prison.

They landed on the nearby island, happy to have clean air. Once she had caught her breath, Astrid took a look at whoever Toothless dragged. Lying them on the ground, she could see it was a girl. More of a woman actually, as she seemed about the viking's age.

Her clothes were burned and torn. Not unusual, but the style of them were definitely foreign. She wore a long, white dress that only exposed her hands and whatever part of her skin that was burned. She also wore white leggings that had darkened from the fires. But the most unusual thing was that she had no shoes. But this mystery had answered itself when she saw the blackened metal shackles that covered her ankles and wrists.

But there was no time to observe every detail. Quickly, Astrid leaned her ear into the girl's chest and waited. A wave of relief came over her as she heard a small heartbeat. She sighed, then lifted the girl back onto Toothless carefully. She tried not to touch her burns too much, but they were all over her body. Whoever she was, this girl needed medical attention, and fast. As soon as they were ready, Toothless shot off again and they headed straight for Berk. Both girl's hair flapped in the wind, and Astrid couldn't laugh in such a situation but...

...she found it ironic how this girl had fiery, red curls.

18. Chapter 18

****Mystery Guest****

Astrid had tried her best to not be seen, but it was hard trying to hide as she carried an unconscious, burned girl to her home. Not many saw her, but those that did spread the rumor quickly. While they chatted away making guesses as to who this girl might be and what Astrid is doing, the young viking girl quickly got the help of one of the village women, Phlegma, and began nursing the girl.

They started by treating her burns and wrapping the damaged skin and flesh in clean bandages. Some of the burns were so bad, they decided not to wrap them and just put a cool cloth over the wound. She never woke up, but they could see some of her muscles tighten when they treated some of the burns. She must have been in a lot of pain. Astrid did her best to pick the locks on the shackles and they found burns under those as well. Eventually, Astrid was able to leave the

girl in Phlegma's care without being too worried, so she set out to find Hiccup.

Of all places, he was on the docks. He wasn't normally there so it took more time to find him. He was busy discussing with Bucket about a sick Changewing that was found.

"Hiccup!" Astrid called as she ran down the docks.

"Astrid, I can't talk about that right now." Hiccup raised his hands as if she would attack him.

"This isn't about that."

"Well then, whatever it is, it can wait. There's a downed Changewing at the edge of the Whispering Islands."

Astrid grabbed his arm. "Obviously you haven't heard the rumor yet."

"Knowing this place, I'll find out soon." He tried to pull his arm back, but she was too strong.

"Stop talking and find out sooner."

"What? Why?" Hiccup was getting rather annoyed with all harshness.

Astrid let go of his arm then pulled something she attached to her belt. It was the shackles from the girl.

"Earlier this morning, Toothless and I spotted a ship that had caught fire to the south. Someone was trapped on it. She may have been a prisoner."

"Well, where on the ship did you find her?"

"I didn't find her. Toothless did."

"Do you know where the ship was from?"

"No, but she's definitely not from around here."

"Can I see her?"

She shook her head. "Best not. She's breathing on her own, but she inhaled a lot of smoke from the fire. She just needs to rest, and Phlegma says she should wake up in a day or two."

He sighed. "Alright. So where is she now?"

"At my house. I'll look after her."

He nodded. "Let me know when she wakes up."

She nodded back and he turned back to Bucket. "But while I have your attention." she cut in before they could continue their conversation.

Hiccup turned back slowly. "Astrid, no. Not now."

"Then when?" she looked offended.

His face gave a dark grimace. "Later. Just...not now."

She rolled her eyes, but she didn't push it. Instead she headed back up the steep docks to her home.

The entire next day consisted of rumors and stories of Astrid and the Mystery Guest. Some made guesses to why she was there, others thought she might have gotten into trouble with the Gods, though most just wondered who she was. Astrid and other women in the village took turns looking after her and changing her bandages. But other than that, the day went on with the usual routine.

Occasionally the girl would appear to have nightmares, tossing and turning and even thrashing out. Once she even screamed at the top of her lungs, but never once did she wake up. All anyone could do was either watch or try to keep her from hitting anything else. Astrid found it difficult to hold her down without touching her burns, but eventually she would calm down and allow her body to go limp once again.

The viking felt sorry for her. She didn't know who she was, or why she was kept prisoner on that ship, but whatever the reason it kept her restless. For all she knew, the girl could have done some horrible crime, and deserved to be locked up. But the continuous nightmares forbade her from thinking that way.

Since she kept such a steady eye on the girl, no one wondered who she was more than Astrid. Unfortunately, the girl didn't wake until the next night.

****In the Chief's House****

"Dad! Enough!"

Hiccup stormed up the stairs after listening to his father trying to persuade him to marry quickly again. It was already late night, so Toothless was already curled up in his corner. His head popped up once he heard the angry adult stomp up the steps. Frustrated and tired, Hiccup kicked the bedpost then flopped down hard on his bed.

Toothless put his head back down. This outrage that emulated from Hiccup became so normal now, the dragon was used to the mini-tantrums.

"Sorry bud." Hiccup sighed with his eyes closed. "I'm just tired of all this."

The dragon curled up even tighter around its body as if to say, "You and me both..."

Hiccup sighed again, then put his arm over his face. He wasn't really upset with his dad, but the pressure he's received started since he took on the role as chief, and it hasn't let up at all. Before he and Toothless killed the Red Death all those years ago, he never really thought he would ever become chief. He tried hard to please his dad, but he always thought the chieftainship would go to Snotlout since he

actually seemed fit to kill a dragon. Because of this, he never wanted to or felt a need to learn how to be a good chief.

He sat up and looked the wall above his bed. There, hanging as a memento, sat his mother's shield. The shield that protected him when she died. The scars of fallen arrows and swords still remained on the old wood. Gently, he lifted his hand and touched the rim of the defensive weapon.

"You'd know what to do, mom." he whispered.

Slowly, he put his hand back down and looked over at Toothless. He seemed to be asleep already, but Hiccup need a break. He needed to get out of there.

"Hey, Toothless!" he called, but the dragon didn't stir. "Do you wanna go flying?"

None of its other muscles moved, but Hiccup could see the dragon's eyelid open to reveal its dilated green eye. He could also see a small hint of a smile in the dragon's cheek.

Hiccup returned the smile and sprung up off the bed. Without hesitation, they got ready and crawled out the window, careful to not alert his father. As soon as they were outside, Hiccup jumped on Toothless' back and the two disappeared into the night, the dragon's black hide allowing them to blend with the sky.

****First Conversation****

Astrid groaned and stretched her sore shoulders as she walked up the darkened path. Even though she had spent half her day taking care of the stranger, she still had other duties to perform. Since Hiccup was chief and had more things to do, most people looked to Astrid and Fishlegs for their dragon problems. This time, Astrid had to wrangle a Monstrous Nightmare away from a Snaptrapper who got its heads tangled in the Nightmare's tail. It had taken up Astrid's entire afternoon, and she couldn't be happier to go home. As soon as she walked in, she kicked off her boots and shed off her usual shoulder armor.

Unlike Hiccup's home, Astrid had a one-story house. All around, her walls were decorated with the weapons of her ancestors, all except for one. As per usual, her mother's axe was hooked onto her belt. She had a small cooking area to the right, and to the left was her bed which she positioned so it could attain the greatest amount of heat from the small fire pit in the middle. At the foot of the bed was a large trunk.

The survivor was right where Astrid had left her, meanwhile Asgerd was trying to wash some bandages in a bucket. Asgerd was an old friend of Astrid's and occasionally liked to participate in the dragon races.

"How's she doing?" Astrid said as she cracked her neck.

"Her burns are healing, but not completely yet." Asgerd ringed out some of the bandages before soaking them in the water again.

"Has she woken up?"

"No. She stirred a little this afternoon, but her eyes were still closed."

Astrid nodded, then proceeded to where Asgerd was sitting. "Here, I'll take care of the rest. You can go on home."

"Okay." Asgerd stood up and stretched. "Thanks. Though there's not much left to take care of. I just changed her bandages and the rest seems normal. So I'd hurry and get some rest if I were you."

Astrid just nodded and waved her off before she left out the door. As fast as she could she finished washing the bandages, hung them to dry then dumped the bucket out the door. She took off her leather skirt and undid her braid before crawling between a pair of sheets she laid on the floor next to the fire pit. She sighed in relief to be lying down after such a long day, and she smiled into the dancing flames next to her. Soon her eyes were closed and the world around her melted away.

However she didn't have much time to dream when she heard a soft moaning of some sort. Opening an eye, she saw the girl turning in her sleep. Astrid waited to see if it would die down, but her moans turned into cries, which then turned into screams. By then Astrid had gotten up and walked to her bedside, ready for anything. Suddenly the girl started thrashing around as she did before, and the young viking grabbed her arms and tried to hold them down. They fought for a moment, then Astrid could see she had stopped, but her muscles were still tensed up.

Astrid moved her eyes to the girl's face, and she had both her bright, blue eyes wide open. The viking quickly let go of her arms and sat in the chair next to her. At first, she did nothing but stare into space, her breaths increasing in pace with every second. Eventually she looked over at Astrid, a sense of fright and terror was evident in her face.

"W-Who are you?" she said quietly.

Astrid took a breath. She didn't want to scare her or make her feel threatened. "My name is Astrid Hofferson." She didn't react. "Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you."

The girl still didn't respond, but her breathing slowed a bit, and she looked around to her surroundings. Despite her being asleep for a day and a half, the girl still looked tired.

"Where am I?"

Astrid could tell her accent was different, but not too unfamiliar. She tried to give her a comforting smile. "We're in Berk. It's a small village to vikings. The Hairy Hooligan Tribe to be exact." She held her breath, not knowing if the girl would be particularly comfortable with vikings.

"Berk?" She whispered. "Thank goodness." and she slipped back into sleep.

Astrid was a bit taken aback. How did she know about Berk? They weren't exactly the most popular viking village around, but she

didn't let it occupy her mind. At least they knew something about her.

After making sure she was completely asleep, Astrid put on her boots and ran out the door. Coming upon the chief's hut, she knocked loudly on the door. Stoick opened it slowly, then raised his eyebrows to see Astrid standing there.

"Astrid! What are you doing here?" he exclaimed.

"Is Hiccup there?"

"No, he left a while ago. Thought I wouldn't notice, but that dragon of his isn't exactly the most silent lizard." Stoick rolled his eyes a bit.

"Oh, well when you see him, could you please tell him she woke up?"

"Who?"

"The girl Toothless and I saved. She woke up! Not for long, but she did."

He paused for a moment. "Oh, alright. I'll tell him."

Sighing, Astrid thanked him and left back down the road. She seemed excited over all this, though why, she still didn't quite get. Perhaps it was because for once, Astrid felt responsible for someone. She never had anyone completely rely on her before, and this whole situation made her feel like the kind of person she always wanted to be: a mother.

****The Next Morning****

Hiccup woke up to his father yelling up the stairs, but he turned over, trying to get more sleep. He and Toothless had been out all night, so they didn't get much sleep.

"Hiccup! It's late! Get up!" Stoick's voice carried itself up the stairs and into Hiccup ears.

The chief groaned and stirred, but eventually he sat up. His clothes and belongings were scattered all over the floor since he was too tired to put them away the previous night. Whining, he got up and dressed himself. He sighed when he looked over to see Toothless still sleeping soundly. That's the one thing he wanted to do at the moment.

"Hiccup! Get up, I need to speak with you!"

And that is the one thing I don't want to do at the moment. He thought to himself. That was the whole reason he stayed out all night and he did not need to go back to it. He paced the room a bit, wondering what to do. Then he looked out the open window, and smiled.

Meanwhile in the Hofferson house, Astrid woke to the redheaded girl staring at her. The viking forgot for a moment that she had woken up at all the night before and was a bit startled. Calmly, she got up

and brushed herself off.

"Morning." she said as she started to comb out and braid her hair.

"Good mornin'." the girl responded. She was sitting up now and it looked like she had taken off some of her bandages.

"Did you sleep well?" Astrid put her hand in a small basket and pulled out a few small fish.

But she didn't answer her question. "Where am I?"

The viking froze. Could it be possible she was losing her memory? "I told you. We're in Berk."

She gave a sigh. "Just makin' sure ah wasn't dreamin' before."

Well, she didn't appear to have memory loss. "So how long have you been awake now?" She set the fish on long skewers then placed them over the embers.

"Only a few minutes. Ah didn't want ta wake ye."

"Oh, that's alright. You didn't really need to. I wake up around the same time every day." Astrid gave her a smile. Luckily, the girl smiled back, but it was only a half smile.

There was a bit of a pause between the two. For a while they only listened to the fish starting to sizzle as Astrid built up the fire again.

"D-do ye need help?" said the girl, hesitantly. She moved the covers to the side and started to get up.

"Huh? Oh! No, you should lie down and rest." Astrid got up in protest, stopping her from standing.

"No, ah'm fine. Ah've been restin' fer a while now."

"Well, I'm almost done anyway." The viking went back to cooking. After a bit she took the fish off the heat and set them on two small plates.

"Here," she said, handing one to the girl, "you must be hungry."

She took it, nodding her head in thanks. In truth, she was starving, so she took a hearty bite out of the fish closest to her. Though she stopped chewing for a moment when she realized it was still under-cooked by a lot.

"I'm not the best cook," said Astrid, "but is it good?"

The girl swallowed her bite then nodded and smiled. "Aye, thank ye." and she kept eating. Even if it was under-cooked, she was still really hungry.

After they were done eating, Astrid took the plates and set them in a bucket filled with water.

"So." Astrid set her chair down in front of the girl and sat down. "Who are you?" Her voice was firm and her eyes locked onto the girl's face.

The girl's eyes widened. "What?" She looked scared as if she were being interrogated.

Astrid took a breath and tried to calm herself a bit. She was naturally strong in more ways than one. "Your name. What's your name?"

She looked down, as if scared to say her name. She opened her mouth a few times, but she just ended up closing it. Astrid could see her eyes shifting around, showing she was thinking intensely.

"It's okay, you don't have to tell me." Astrid smiled at her, but she didn't look up at her again. Sighing, Astrid rose to get dressed. She was halfway getting her skirt on when the girl finally talked again.

"Can ah speak with yer chief?" Her speech was rushed and she almost didn't get all her words out. "Ye said this was a viking village. May ah speak ta yer chief?"

Astrid froze for a moment then resumed getting dressed. "Um, sure. Though he isn't always the easiest to find."

The girl stood up. "Please, ah have ta speak with him over somethin' urgent."

The viking raised an eyebrow. "Well...okay. I think I know a way to get him in one place." She wasn't quite sure what was going on, but it seemed to only way to know what this is all about was to find Hiccup.

19. Chapter 19

****Unexpected****

The sky shone brightly that morning of the girl's full awakening. Soon it was deep into the afternoon and the air began to reach the hottest part of the day. A few drops of sweat trickled down Hiccup's neck and forehead as he hammered against a roof tile. He was helping to fix the Jorgensen's roof after a crazed Gronckle crashed into it.

He was silent as he worked, as he usually was, and Snotlout was working on the other side of the roof while talking, as he usually was. Half the things he said didn't make any sense to those who didn't understand the mind of Snotlout, so basically no one really understood him. Hiccup wasn't really listening, but today he heard him mention Ruffnut, a chicken and a butcher's knife. Occasionally Hiccup would nod or give a nonchalant grunt whenever he heard something along the lines of "Am I right?"

Meanwhile, his mind wandered to what he had to do for the rest of the day, and also to what his father wouldn't stop talking about. It's not that he didn't want to get married. Frankly, he was just scared to. As he continuously thought of the subject he narrowed his eyes

and pouted his lower lip. But all that was erased from his mind for a while when Gustav, a young viking of 15 with dark hair, ran up calling the two adults sitting on top of the broken roof.

"Chief!" he called, "What's all this about a village meeting?"

Hiccup peered over the edge of the roof. "Huh? What meeting?"

"Everyone's gathered in the Great Hall. They said you called an emergency meeting."

"What?" The chief clambered over the tiles and made his way down a rope as quickly as possible. "I never called a meeting."

"How come I wasn't invited?" Snotlout shouted. But as he leaned to see the other two vikings, he lost his balance and fell into the hole.

"Well, they're already there." Gustav shrugged then ran off, Hiccup following after him just as confused as ever.

By the time they made into the Great Hall, all the villagers were running around, trying to figure out what was going on. Hiccup began doing the same. But as soon as he walked in, he was swarmed by people each one shouting at him with the most amount of confusion possible.

"What's going on?"

"Did something bad happen?"

"Why did you call this meeting?"

"Everyone, enough!" called a young voice from the back. Hiccup stretched his neck to see Astrid standing at the head of the Hall, beckoning everyone to come closer to her. "I called this meeting." she announced.

Murmurs filled the Hall, as no one was to call such a sudden meeting except the chief.

Astrid tried to quiet them. "I know I have deceived you into this meeting, but it was the only way to ensure the chief would be here without having to hunt for very long." She paused for a moment. "I have an announcement to make: Two days ago when flying south near the Timberjack Islands, a girl was rescued from a burning ship. She is now awake and moving."

"You called us here just to tell us she's awake?" a voice called from the crowd, and immediately Astrid's audience broke out into protest.

"I wasn't finished!" she yelled, and the noise died down enough for her to speak again. "Yes, she is awake, but not only that she is here in the Great Hall and she wishes to address you."

The crowd fell silent as a small figure emerged from behind a pillar near Astrid and stood in front of the people. She was still wearing

the dirty, white dress she had when found, so her giant red curls stood out against her pale face. Though Hiccup was way in the back, he had a clear view of everything. And as soon as he saw the girl, his stomach dropped.

"People of Berk," she started, "Ah have been told that durin' mah time here, there were rumors goin' around about mah history and the circumstances that brought me here." She took a deep breath and continued. "Well, now ah wish to put all such rumors to rest. Ah feel it best to start with my origin. As you can probably tell, ah am not from around here."

Hiccup heart began to beat faster and faster with every word she spoke. Her accent echoed deep within his ears.

"I am Princess Merida of the Kingdom DunBroch in the highlands of Scotland."

The crowd murmured again at the mention of Scotland, and piercing eyes made their way to the princess. But she paid them no attention. She only looked forward in pride and determination. Meanwhile, Hiccup's entire body froze and his heart all but stopped.

"Aye, ah know there have been disputations among you and people from my country, but rest assured I am not yer enemy. Now, as to th' story behind the ship, ah was on a voyage from mah home when our ship was attacked by pirates. I was prisoner there until ah started th' fire from mah cell. Unfortunately, ah couldn't escape as well as ah thought ah would an' ah was trapped. So if it weren't fer Astrid here," she gestured to the viking whose eyes widened as soon as she heard her name, "ah would not be alive to stand in front of ye today. Ah owe mah life to her."

Merida turned her head and smiled at Astrid who just stood, surprised at such a thanks and eventually responded with a small smile. The redhead turned back to her audience, and prepared herself with another deep breath.

"But this is not all ah wish ta tell ye. Ye see, as a princess and heir to th' throne, ah was never allowed to go out ta sea. This time was th' only exception because mah kingdom is in danger."

The princess half expected a reaction but received none. By now, the crowd was listening intently, wondering what could have happened.

"Mah kingdom was attacked by creatures common to Berk. A swarm of dragons tore apart our castle, an' burned our village. Ah managed ta barely escape, but fer all ah know mah kingdom is lost. As you are experts on dragons an' know much, ah petition to ask yer chief if you could help us."

The crowd almost immediately turned to Hiccup, who hadn't moved an inch since he first saw her face. He knew he needed to go up to speak to her, but his legs felt like lead, and the sweat on his neck turned cold. He didn't move until someone close to him pushed him forward and nearly made him fall over. The walk up to the front felt like an eternity, and as he approached Merida, his head began to spin, and his face grew pale. But she didn't look him in the eyes, and she knelt down to his feet once he was before her.

"Dear chief, please. Ah beg of you, save mah people."

Hiccup paused for a moment. The tension increased with every second, as everyone anticipated his answer.

"Meridaâ€¦" he said quietly, "â€¦it's me, Hiccup."

Immediately, she looked up. It wasn't long until she stood and stared at him, studying his face and eyes. She mouthed his name as an echo. He nodded ever so slightly, so that even the people in the front row would have had to look hard to see it. He had no idea how she would react. Would she be happy to see him? Or would she be angry as he never went back to see her? Would she be sad?

Then the most unexpected thing happened. Merida burst out laughing with no warning at all, making everyone in the room jump. Her curls bounced with her laughter, and her eyes squeezed shut, almost making her shed a tear.

No one had any idea what to do. Hiccup didn't know whether to be happy that she recognized him or insulted at her laughter. The mass of vikings were confused at both their chief and the girl, but they were mostly in shock from seeing such a dramatic change in a mood of serenity and pride to giddy and hysteric occur in her. Astrid was just as confused, but as a good tactical observer, she also wondered why a swarm of dragons would attack Scotland.

Merida's laughter echoed through the Hall and it continued on for so long everyone's eyes began to shift about. Finally, she died down and her laughing turned into simple heavy breathing.

"Crivens!" she huffed, "Ah had been preparin' myself ta meet this high an' powerful chief an' it's Hiccup!" she began to laugh again, but it didn't get as rambunctious as before. "Well, now. It seems our scrawny viking grew up! Ah didn't even recognize ye!" She nudged him in the arm playfully and continued to giggle.

"Uhâ€¦thanks?" said Hiccup hesitantly. "It'sâ€¦been a while."

"Aye. Four years." Merida's tone changed and she gave a rather heavy emphasis on every word.

"Yeahâ€¦about thatâ€¦" Hiccup rubbed the back of his head and tried to avoid as much eye contact as possible.

"Wait a minute, hold everything!" Astrid stepped in, waving her arms. "You two know each other?"

Hiccup bit his lip. "Remember when I went missing all those years ago for months after Toothless and I went out in a storm? Well, I wound up in Scotland, and Merida here was the one who saved my life. She and her family took care of me while I was thereâ€¦"

Astrid raised her eyebrows. "You never said you were in Scotland."

"W-well how could I? I meanâ€¦well first off you never asked! Secondâ€¦well you know our people weren't always the mostâ€¦friendlyâ€¦with their peopleâ€¦"

The crowd erupted into gasps and murmurs. It was true he hadn't mentioned much on what he was doing all those months he was gone, but no one really questioned him. They figured he had gone through enough and didn't need to recall anything. The only ones who remained silent were the three standing in front of everyone, and Stoick who stood with narrow eyes, staring at the Scott who stood before him.

Though it didn't take long for the noise to die down as everyone was waiting to see what happened next. Unfortunately, neither Hiccup nor Astrid knew what to say. Luckily, Merida piped in to break the silence.

"Wow, ye didn't say anythin' about me then?" her voice was soft, but Hiccup felt like she was accusing him. "Of all th' things ye told me back in DunBroch ah would've assumed ye at least _mentioned_ me."

"And what EXACTLY did he tell you?" Stoick's voice boomed through everyone's ears and continued on to bounce off the walls. Taking responsibility for his words, he stood tall and straightened his back.

Merida hesitated. Whoever he was, she immediately felt terrified of him. He had the aura of a great leader and fighter.

"J-just things pertainin' ta him bein' a vikingâ€|an' he told me about yer people, an' how he learned ta train dragonsâ€|" her pace was slow, and her eyes shifted around the retired chief's face as she tried to avoid eye contact.

"WHAT about our people?" he took a few heavy steps toward the girl.

She wanted to shrink away from him as soon as possible. "H-he jus' told me about his friends, his teacher, Gobber, an' his fatherâ€|who ah assume ye areâ€|"

Stoick raised an eyebrow, but his mood didn't change. As soon as he heard the word 'Scotland', images of his beloved wife flashed through his mind, and his rage boiled him into an untamable storm.

"Yes, that's right." Hiccup finally stepped between Merida and his father. "Merida, this is my dad, Stoick the Vast." he gestured to the large, bearded ginger. "Daaad, this is my FRIEND, Merida." he gestured over to Merida.

"Yes, I heard her, son." He gave her a dark, long stare before turning his gaze upon the rest of the crowd. "I'm sorry everyone, but I believe this conversation will have to continue in private."

Everyone roared up in complaints and groans, but the old chief raised his hand and everyone fell silent. It wasn't long before everyone filed out the door out of fear of Stoick.

Soon the Hall was cleared out except for the Scott, the chief, Astrid, Stoick and Gobber. If it weren't for the blacksmith hobbling over and convincing Stoick to sit down, he would've continued to glare at the princess. Taking her by the shoulders, Astrid moved

Merida over to a seat as well. Silence caught them again, and all members of the remaining party were forced to simply look around in awkwardness.

"Chief Stoickâ€|" Merida said, breaking the silence once again, "Ah understand that there have been things in th' past which would cause ye ta not trust me, but-"

"Oh, you do, do you?" his words were cold and his tone made everyone shiver.

"Dad-" Hiccup tried to protest, but Merida cut him off.

"Ayeâ€|Hiccup also told me about his mother." Stoick looked into her eyes, his green eyes darting straight into hers. She took a breath. "An' ah'm very sorry about what happened, but ah can't change th' past. Ah can only promise that ah would never do anythin' ta hurt you or yer people."

She tried to soften her eyes as much as possible, so that maybe he could trust her even a little bit. But Stoick didn't want to trust her. For so long, he hated the Scotts. The one time he let his guard down around them, he lost his wife. He was determined not to lose anyone else, especially not Hiccup.

Still charged by fury, Stoick stood and left the Hall, Gobber stumbling after him. Hiccup wanted to stay and speak with Merida, but he knew there was no changing the old chief's mind without him.

"I'llâ€|speak to you later. I justâ€|got to go."

Both girls nodded at him, and he ran off. As soon as the door closed, Merida gave a huge sigh and let her face rest in her palms.

"Hey, you okay?" Astrid said, putting an arm around her.

"Tha' was terribleâ€|" Merida groaned from under her hands. "Tha' was not how it was supposed ta go."

"Wellâ€|I suppose that's the first thing you gotta know about Berk. The unexpected always happens."

****Back at the Haddock House****

"Now, that was quite an event!" Gobber sighed as he sat down at the table. "Someone's got some explaining to do!" he shot a look at Hiccup who remained standing as Stoick sat across from Gobber.

"Look, knock it off, will you?" Hiccup was much too tired for Gobber's sarcasm. "Dad, I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but-"

"But _what_, Hiccup?" without standing, he pulled two mugs and poured some mead from under the table. After filling the cups, he handed one to Gobber and started drinking.

"But I knew you would act this way."

"Years and you couldn't even let me know what you were doing all that time? Where you were? Who you'd met?" he took another swig.

"To be honest, I didn't really feel a need to."

"To be honest, I don't think I could ever trust her."

Hiccup brushed a hand through his hair. "Did you hear her? Her entire kingdom is in danger! Dad, we can help her, maybe even start an alliance. You've told me that sometimes you have to ignore your emotions and think things through politically, and that's what I'm doing!"

"Then what are you doing here talking to me?" His mug was now empty, and he reached under the table to fill it again. But Hiccup moved over and put his hand over his dad's cup.

"Because you're still my father, and I need you to see things the way I see them. Dadâ€¦I've been to their land. They aren't the people who killed mom."

Stoick looked at his son, but he remained stoic and pulled his mug from under Hiccup's hand and refilled it.

"Perhaps, but I still can't trust her." Hiccup groaned out of frustration. "Howeverâ€¦" he continued, "it's not my place to decide whether we as a tribe help her. You're the chief, you make the decision. Whatever you say, I'll go along with, but not for her."

Hiccup sighed. That was good enough for now. At least he, as a tribe member, would help. Slowly, he walked up the stairs to his room as Gobber tried to cheer up Stoick with dry sarcasm and old tales.

Blocking out all other sounds, Hiccup proceeded to his dresser where he kept some of his clothes. When he opened the top drawer, some of the wood creaked, making Toothless perk up. The lazy dragon had been sitting there all day since he was still asleep with Hiccup got up and Astrid was busy with Merida. The dragon simply watched as the chief pulled out pieces of clothing and occasionally a notebook or two till he found it.

Sitting at the bottom of the drawer was a silver pendant. On it were three Celtic bears whose designs danced around one another. The chain it was on had long since been broken, as well as the promise that went with it.

20. Chapter 20

Wardrobe

After they were left alone in the Great Hall, Astrid took Merida back to her house. Most of the journey back was spent in silence, but occasionally Merida would slow to a near stop looking at everything around her. She had done the same on the way to the Great Hall, but the princess seemed more nervous about having to speak in front of the people then. Upon arriving at the viking's house, Astrid moved to her trunk at the foot of her bed and opened it. Inside were many

pieces of clothing as well as a few weapons.

"Well," she said while pulling out articles of clothing "can't have you walking around Berk like thatâ€|Here." She grabbed a handful of clothes and handed them to Merida. "You can change in here. I'll go wait outside."

"Uh, thanks." The princess took the clothes hesitantly.

Astrid moved to the door and opened it. "Call me if you need anything." she said before she walked outside.

Merida nodded then set down the clothes and examined them. There was a dark, lightweight tunic with no sleeves that reached down to her knees, plus another light blue tunic with long sleeves with a belt. There was also a pair of brown slacks, a leather skirt with spikes lined down it, a pair of brown bracers, and boots lined with fur on the inside. Merida dressed herself carefully so as not to displace the bandages that still covered her burned skin, but it wasn't long before she ran into a problem.

"Uhâ€|Astrid?" she called.

"Yeah?" she replied.

"Th' skirt doesn't fit. Ah'm afraid mah hips are too wide."

Astrid walked in too see the dilemma. Smiling softly, she walked over and took the skirt. "It's okay. It's one of my old skirts. You don't have to wear it." And she threw it back in the trunk. She continued to smile as she looked Merida up and down, satisfied. "Do you want me to braid your hair? Berk is full of dragons, and we wouldn't want it getting singed."

"Well, it already got singed in th' fire." the princess sighed.

"Doesn't mean we have to let it get damaged anymore." Astrid led her over to the chair and sat her down. Merida actually wanted her hair to be left out free, but she didn't argue and waited for her to be done.

Astrid tried her best to braid it, but Merida's hair came to be more difficult to work with than she imagined. Her curls just kept tangling with one another and refusing to separate. Eventually, she just gave up and tied a string around her hair near the bottom to keep it together, but even then some strands got loose.

Merida gave a small chuckle when she realized the viking had given up. "Don't worry. Yer not th' first. Mah mum could never get mah hair ta do what she wanted."

"Well, your mom's a brave woman for even attempting more than once." She gave a small laugh as she stretched her arms and fingers, then patted Merida on the shoulders. "Well, do you want me to show you around Berk?"

The Scott looked up. "Ah have ta speak ta Hiccup about mah request."

"We have a bit of time before that. Usually when he goes to talk with his dad like that it turns into an argument, and he'd need to cool off for a bit anyway."

Merida nodded, then stood up. "Then ah suppose there's no harm in lookin' around first."

Astrid smiled brightly and the two of them walked out the door. She took her all around the village, introducing her to everyone they came across and telling her all about them. The first dragon they ran into was Meatlug, who tried to rub against Merida's hand, but the princess moved away quickly, not knowing what to expect.

"It's okay." Astrid tried to reassure her. "They aren't gonna hurt you. Dragons are our friends here." But Merida still didn't go near it. During the whole tour she avoided every dragon they came across, even after she saw how well humans and dragons got along. It didn't help when Hookfang nearly toppled her over while Snotlout tried to get her attention. He managed to land a good five feet away from them.

"Hey, babe." called Snotlout from the back of the dragon's neck. "Name's Snotlout Jorgensen." he jumped off the dragon and approached Merida who raised her eyebrow at him. He opened his mouth to speak, but she interrupted him. "Oh! Yer th' hothead!" Snotlout stopped and cocked his head, but Astrid burst out laughing.

"Who told you that?" he said, offended.

"Hiccup did. When he was in Scotland." she shrugged.

He raised his eyebrows. "Wait. He talked about me?"

"Aye. More of mentioned really. Th' only ones he really talked of were his mum an' Astrid."

The female viking stopped laughing. "Really? He did? What did he say?"

"He didn't SAY much. But he blushed whenever he talked about ye an' how FRIENDLY th' two of ye were." Merida smiled.

"Oh." Astrid sighed. Unexpectedly, she looked more sad than anything.

"Somethin' wrong?" Merida said, looking over at her.

Astrid just smiled again and shook her head. "No, nothing. C'mon, I wanted you to meet Gobber. He's used to be the town blacksmith, but now he and Hiccup spend part of the day making saddles and fixing dragon teeth."

"I'll come with you, and helpâ€¦show her around." Snoutlout said salaciously.

"Noâ€¦you won't." Astrid forcefully shoved his face, making him stumble away while they walked toward the smithy. "So," she continued as they walked the path, "Did Hiccup mention Gobber?"

"A bit. He's Hiccup's teacher, right?"

Astrid nodded. "More or less. By the way, did you know who I was when I gave you my name?"

"Aye. Well, it took a bit of time, but as soon as ah remembered where ah heard the word 'Berk' from, ah knew."

"How come you didn't say anything before the meeting?"

She shrugged. "Ah didn't know how ye'd react, an' ah was in a wee bit of a hurry ta meet with yer chief. Speakin' o' which, ah'm still in a hurry."

"It's okay. I'm sure when Hiccup's done doing whatever nonsense he's gotten into, he'll come find you this time."

"How can ye be so sure?"

"Well, for starters, he knows you. So that means he won't avoid you, and it seemed like he wanted to say something to you earlier beforeâ€¦well, before his dad came into the conversation."

"Ah don't know. He kind of looked like he wanted ta run away an' hide forever."

"Well, it didn't help that you kind of laughed at his face."

Merida chuckled a bit. "Well, ah'm sorry. But whenever ah remembered Hiccup all ah saw was an awkward, scrawny, wee laddie who could barely lift his own weight. An' now he's gone an' grown up on me."

Astrid laughed. "That's what happened when you get older."

At that moment they arrived at the smithy, but Gobber had only just gotten there himself, and by the looks of it, he had been drinkingâ€¦a lot. As they got closer, they could see there was no fire lit, and all the blacksmith was doing was dancing and singing while stumbling over nothing.

"Heil! To the ladies over yonder!" he called as the girls approached. He kept humming and spinning while they watched in complete silence. Occasionally he would kick over a toolbox or fall on a table.

"He's not usually like this, I swear." Astrid whispered over to the confused Scott. Merida just nodded slowly. "Gobber, how much ale did you drink?" Astrid called, approaching him carefully as she would a wild dragon.

He stopped moving for a moment. "Only a few kegs. Don't worry. I'll have plenty room for more!" he skipped around a bit more before the female viking forced him into a chair. Even while sitting he tapped his peg leg and hummed some strange tune.

"Gobber, what were you doing drinking so much?" Astrid sat down across from him, tired from wrestling him.

"Well," he burped, "Stoick offered, so I drank. Until Hiccup threw me out the door and _pew_â€¦here I amâ€¦"

Astrid gave a heavy sigh, then wheeled around to lead Merida someplace else. "Sorry," she said, "we can come back when he's more sober." taking her arm, Astrid tried to get the princess out of there as quickly as possible.

To her surprise, Merida just gave a hearty laugh, amused by the drunkenness of the man. "He reminds me of mah dad. Jus' drinks away till he fall over."

"What kind of man is your father?"

Merida continued chuckling as they walked away from the smithy. "Well, known as 'The Bear King', mah dad is respected fer fightin' the largest, most dangerous bears an' still survivin'. Well, not without gettin' his leg chomped off."

Astrid's eyes widened. "Woah, so is the bear still out there?"

"No, mah mum killed it."

"Wait, what?" They stopped walking. Astrid was beginning to wonder what kind of people really lived in Scotland.

Merida gave a heavy sigh. "It's a long story."

****Conflict****

"Dad, what were you thinking?" Hiccup groaned as he dragged his father away from the table. He had just scolded Gobber and sent him out the door as Stoick tried to get another drink. While he was upstairs, he heard their singing get louder, but he didn't notice how drunk they were till their laughing turned into a laughing nonsense.

"I wasn'tâ€¦" Stoick chuckled and groaned as Hiccup led him to his bed where he flopped down. The chief wrestled the man's mug away from him and set it firmly on the table.

"Actually," Stoick leaned over and grabbed his son's hand. "I was thinking about your mother."

Hiccup froze. The previous conversation was just a giant reminder to Stoick and the village on what the Scotts did to his mother.

"I remember her favorite songâ€¦" the drunken viking slurred. "I'd swim and slâ€¦hnnâ€¦svage seasâ€¦"

Hiccup started cleaning up. Stoick released his hand as soon as he started singing again. The chief had heard the song over twenty times now while Gobber was still in the house, but he thought it best to let his father have it one more time.

"No freezing sun nor scorching rainâ€¦can evr hnnâ€¦"

He continued mumbling through the song before he finally gave a large yawn which transitioned into a snore. Once he was finally asleep, Hiccup sighed and sat down at the table. His face curled into a worried look as his eyes gazed over his father.

He remembered how conflicted he was once he realized he had woken up

in Scotland all those years ago, remembering how his own mother was killed by such people, and in such an unforgiving manner. The only difference now is that no one has the need to trust this visitor. They could ignore her plea for help and not have anything to do with her kingdom. Hiccup, however, had to trust the people who saved his life and hopefully find his own way home.

Exhausted and conflicted, he placed the silver necklace on the table. He had taken it out of his dresser only seconds before he realized how drunk the two men were downstairs, so he carried it in his hand the whole time.

The more he stared at it, the more he could feel a large knot forming at the back of his throat. His guilt forced him to look away from it. At first, he did intend to go back, but with all the dragons and the academy and everything that needed to be done on Berk, he stayed. Within a few months, he forgot. And that's what killed him the most. Had Merida not come to Berk, had Astrid not saved her, he would never have gone back. Groaning, he leaned back in his chair, allowing the back to catch him.

Why are dragons attacking DunBroch? He thought as he closed his eyes. _Perhaps it's another Death._ A sigh escaped his mouth as he remembered the giant dragon he faced as a young 15 year old. He didn't want to have to face another one again, but if it were to save the people he once came to love, he would do it.

Just then Toothless waddled down the steps. He still looked tired with his eyes only half open, and he gave a yawn as large as Stoick's once he saw Hiccup sitting at the table.

Hiccup chuckled, "That's what you get for sleeping in all day."

The dragon glared at him, then walked over to whap him with his tail. Unfortunately, he misjudged the distance and only grazed his hair. Grumbling, he moved out the door by himself, his tail swishing behind him.

He blinked as soon as the sun hit his eyes, and he gave another wide yawn. Finally outside, he stretched his wings to their full span and loosened his muscles. After flapping his now awake bat-like wings he looked over across the village to the feeding station. There was still a good amount of fish piled up, and the fishermen hadn't even come with another load yet.

The Night Fury bounded toward the feeding station with the smell of fish entering his flared nostrils. But there was something else in the air. Something familiar yet it didn't belong. He stopped and sniffed the air. It didn't take long to pinpoint the strange smell.

Suddenly his eyes widened as he realized what it was. Turning his head, he saw two familiar figures. One he recognized right away as Astrid and the other was the redhead he smelled from the burning ship.

Excited, he leaped toward them. He stopped right before them, smiling and ready for some form of affection. He knew this girl. Her face was hazy in his memory but there was no denying the smell of the nice girl from four years ago.

"Hey there, Toothless!" Astrid said as she rubbed the side of his face. He purred at her touch, but he wanted more attention. However when he came over to the Scott she looked hesitant, and took half a step backward.

Slightly disappointed, he sat down and lowered his ears. Right then her face softened and she lifted her hand to him.

"There's a familiar face." she exclaimed, and he pressed his nose against her palm. Giggling, she stroked his face, then his neck and continued to rub and scratch it. Loving the great amount of affection, he purred and groaned at her scratches, until she scratched under his jaw and all the muscles in his body went numb. Happily, he flopped to the ground as she laughed and continued to stroke him.

"Where did you learn that?" Astrid said.

The princess shrugged. "There are some things ye never forget."

21. Chapter 21

"It was th' biggest bear ah ever saw, with black fur an' its hide littered with th' weapons of fallen warriorsâ€¦with one dead eye. Mah father drew his sword, andâ€¦"

The children of Berk tensed up as they listened intently to the tale.

"One swipe of it's massive paw an' his sword shattered! Then CHOMP! His leg was clean off! Down th' monster's throat it wentâ€¦"

All of them gasped, their eyes growing as large as saucers. All except Astrid who was calmly listening to the tale a second time. She became so interested in the origin of her father's nickname that she practically begged her to tell the story. However, just as she was ending, a group of children came to hear what was so interesting. After a few sentences they became the most attentive audience Merida ever had.

"Mor'du has never been seen since, and is roamin' th' wild, waitin' fer his chance of revengeâ€¦"

Just then she gave a mocking bear roar and the children leaped up screaming and laughing. They scattered in all directions, most of them running back to their homes, others going off to play somewhere else. Chucking, Astrid walked up to Merida who was now laughing at the screaming children.

"How come you weren't that animated when you told it to me?" The viking said, crossing her arms.

Merida shrugged. "Ah guess ah didn't think ye'd be that entertained."

Astrid gave a small scoff, but laughed it off. "Well, there's a lot more to me than meets the eye." She groaned as she slowly sat next to

Merida, trying to stretch her legs in the process.

"Ah suppose that makes two of us." Merida sighed.

"Oh please." Astrid scoffed again. "I figured that out about you this morning in the Great Hall."

The princess gave a sarcastic-looking smile, and then looked out to the horizon that poked out from the Cliffside. Most of the sun's light had left already and the sky was a blazing orange that faded into a deep red.

"Wow," she said softly, "it's that late already?"

"Yeah," sighed Astrid, "We should probably get home then."

"Home" the word echoed through Merida's mind. Even after they stood and walked toward the viking's house, Merida's thoughts drifted to her home. She remembered the sweet smell of the highlands that breezed through the land, and the crisp air of the midnight moon. Such thoughts continued even until she closed her eyes to sleep.

****Urgency****

The dreams seemed all too realistic for the princess. For a while, it seemed she were truly at home, laughing and joking with her family. She could hear her father's hearty bellowing of a laugh, she could feel her brothers wrestling with her over a fur carpet, and she could see her mother's scolding face which eventually melted into amusement.

Then they came. Dragons of all shapes and colors tore apart the room, burning everything. She could feel the radiant heat surround her, the smoke was choking her throat and her eyes began to water, blurring the images of her screaming family.

The nightmare could not have ended sooner. She lie awake now, her back on the hard floor and a familiar viking peering over her.

"Merida, are you okay?"

The princess breathed slowly, allowing herself to take reality back in. Astrid only relaxed when she finally nodded.

"Ah'm fine." Merida sat up, but her eyes stared into nothingness. Suddenly, she grabbed Astrid by the shoulders and practically shouted, "Ah need ta speak with Hiccup! Ah shouldn't have waited so long, now mah people could definitely be gone. Please!"

For a moment, Astrid just sat there, not knowing what to do. Then she nodded slowly.

"Okay."

****The Meeting****

Fishlegs yawned and looked groggily around the room. It wasn't even dawn yet, but Astrid managed to drag the old team out of bed and tell

them all to meet in the Great Hall. Snotlout fell back asleep, his face resting on the table they were all sitting around. The twins were just as tired, but whenever Tuffnut leaned on his sister to sleep, he was met with a forceful punch that jolted him awake again. The only ones who seemed truly awake were Hiccup, Astrid, and the Scottish Princess.

None of them were fully dressed, making the scene look more like a slumber party than an important meeting.

"What's going on?" Snotlout said, jolting up after Astrid threw a cup someone left at his face.

"For the seventh time," Hiccup said annoyed, "We've got a dragon situation."

"Like that's new." Tuffnut said just after getting punched by Ruffnut again.

Hiccup rolled his eyes, then turned to Merida. "Merida, you said there was attack on your land. Can you describe it?"

"Well, we didn't see it comin'. After all, ah'd never seen a dragon in mah life till Toothless."

"Where were you when they started?"

"In mah room. It was th' dead of night when they started. All of a sudden, ah hear screamin' an' when ah get out there are dragon all over th' place, massacrin' mah people."

Hiccup looked down. "It sounds like a raid. Though, the dragons wouldn't fight people for no reason. Did you fight back?"

"O' course we fought back! Ye don't jus' sit back an' relax while someone's attackin' ye do you?"

"Okay, okay." he said, defensively. "Was it just one kind of dragon, or were there many species?"

"All kinds."

"I agree with Hiccup. It sounds like a dragon raid." Astrid said calmly. "Did you notice them going for any food or livestock?"

"Well, ah wasn't exactly seein' what they were goin' fer. All ah know is that ah was fightin' with whatever was around till mah mum grabbed me an' mah brothers an' sent us off on different ships. Why we couldn't stay on th' same ship is beyond mah knowledge."

"You don't think it's another Seadragonus Giganticus Maximus do you?" Fishlegs said warily. His eyes shifted as though it were there with them.

"I don't know," Hiccup said, "but we can't be too careful. Everyone take provisions to last a few days, and bring your weapons. We'll leave in the morning."

"Wait, wait." said Snotlout, still half-asleep. "How are we supposed

to know the way? None of us have ever been there."

"I've been there, and so has Toothless. And you know how a dragon never forgets a place as soon as they've been there. So everyone be sure to get your dragons ready to go first thing." Hiccup stood up, ready to go back to bed. He could feel a yawn coming up as this was the second night in a row he lost sleep.

"Wait, we're goin' on dragons?" Merida said. There was a small quiver in her voice, and her eyes grew wide.

Everyone froze and stared at her. The idea of travelling in any other method seemed almost unbelievable.

"Well, duh." said Tuffnut. "Do you expect us to fly by ourselves?"

"Butâ€¦why don't we take a boat or somethin'?" Her eyes shifted through all the other faces staring at her.

"A boat's too slow," explained Astrid, "and dragons don't need the wind or a current to move them. If you want to get back as soon as possible, dragons are the way to go."

Merida looked defeated. There was no way she could argue against it, but it was obvious the thought of flight terrified her.

"I guess that settles it then." said Hiccup. The others agreed and one by one they stood, all of them too eager to get back to bed.

Merida stood as well, but just as she turned to leave, Hiccup grabbed her arm.

"Merida, wait. Can I talk to you for a second?" he said.

"There's nothin' more ta talk about."

"But-"

"Ye best get yer sleep, Hiccup." she said, and pulling her arm away she headed toward the door. Astrid was waiting for her, holding the door open, but when the Scot reached her, she said,

"You go on ahead, Merida. I'll join you soon."

The princess nodded then went off, hoping she could find her way back to Astrid's house. As soon as she was gone, Astrid walked toward Hiccup who was on his way out the door. To prevent him from going any further, she grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him away.

"Wha-? Astrid, what are you doing?" he said, surprised.

"We need to talk." she said sternly. "You've been avoiding me for weeks, and you're not gonna muscle your way out of it this time." she led him back to his seat where he sat down.

"Astrid, I'm tired. We can talk in the morning."

"No. We're going to talk about the marriage now."

****The Next Morning****

Panic could not even describe what Hiccup was feeling. He had packed and gotten ready as he instructed everyone else to do, but as soon as he turned around, Toothless was gone. He ran all around the village, checking the feeding stations, the stables, everyone's house, even the smithy. But the dragon was nowhere to be seen.

Breathing heavily, the chief ran his fingers through his hair. Of all the times to go missing, it had to be right before they're about to leave. Even the twins were ready to go, which says a lot. Heading back to his house, Hiccup ran into his father.

"Dad! What are you doing?" he said, noticing the large pack on the man's shoulders.

"I heard you're going to Scotland." he responded harshly.

"Uh, yeah. To help with Merida's dragon problem. Who- who told you?"

"The twins have big mouths. Now I'm coming with you, no question about it." stepping around his son, he started off to fetch Skull Crusher.

Hiccup stumbled after his father. "Wait, dad. Who's going to look after the village?"

"Gobber and Spitelout can do it. They've done it before."

"Hold on. Dad, stop!" Hiccup ran in front of his father, preventing him from going any farther. "It could be dangerous. We think there may be another dragon like the Red Death."

Stoick looked deep into his son's eyes. "Then there is no doubt of me coming."

"Dad, we can handle it really."

"Well I can't let my son lose another limb or even his life!"

"But dad-"

"Son, as the new chief of Berk, you have to be careful. You are the end of the Haddock line. If anything happened to you—" he trailed off. He never finished, and before either of them could say anything more, Stoick ran off past Hiccup.

Hiccup didn't pursue him anymore, understanding his father's feelings, but a part of him couldn't help but be annoyed over the fact that his father was only so eager to join them because of the fact that they were headed to Scotland: the dwelling of Vahallarama's killers.

His thoughts were spanned when he noticed someone running up to him at a high speed. Turning his head, he saw Astrid running up to him quickly.

"Hiccup!" she called. "Have you seen Merida? She went out for a walk this morning, but she hasn't come back yet!"

"Hey, calm down. I'll go look for her, just go finish getting ready." He put his hands on her shoulders, trying to calm her.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I still need to find Toothless anyway."

"You lost Toothless? Do you think something happened to him?"

He shook his head. "Nah, he can't get off the island, and he knows better than to wander off too far."

"Well, hurry!" Astrid ran off again, checking everywhere for Merida, despite Hiccup's assurance.

"This day just can't get any better." Hiccup said sarcastically. From the way things were going, it seemed like a disoriented family getting ready for a long trip, but no one was ready.

He ran through the forest, calling for both Toothless and Merida, but he neither heard nor saw any traces of either. It seemed the deeper he went into the woods, the more hopeless he became. After a while of climbing over fallen trees and trudging through leaves, he stopped calling and just looked around. Maybe something did happen to Toothless, and maybe even Merida. His heart sank at the idea, and he resumed calling for them again.

All of a sudden he heard a faint shriek. He ran towards the noise, scared that they might be in danger, but then he noticed a bit of laughter following it. He craned his neck, listening for a direction and followed the noises. As he got closer, he could hear along with the laughter, splashing and the purring of a happy dragon. Moving through a few large rocks, he found himself at his and Toothless' special place; the place where he and the dragon first became friends.

It all looked the same. Moss covered grass decorated the surrounding stones and the healthy grass gleamed away from the small lake in the middle. The only difference was a young, redhead cupping water and splashing it on the ebony dragon who in return flicked his tail in her direction, soaking her in cold water.

Her laugh was also just as he remembered it. It wasn't the same as the one she gave the previous day, but it was more light and sweet-sounding. The sound of it reminded him of their days in Scotland where they would forget everything else and run through the village, or have a snowball fight, or even spar with one another.

Eventually she looked up to see him standing above them, staring at the two of them playing.

"Hiccup!" her voice sounded surprised, and quickly she got out of the water. Toothless was disappointed the fun was over, but he gave her one last splash of water. Much to his and Hiccup's disappointment, she didn't laugh again.

The chief went down to meet her, but he didn't seem all too surprised.

"Sorry, ah went out fer a walk in th' woods an' got lost. They're not quite like th' ones at home. Ah called fer help, but only Toothless came ta get me, and ah guess we got carried away here." She looked at him warily as though he was going to scold her. He hated that scared, unfamiliar look.

"It's okay." he said. "But we should probably get back. We need to head out."

She nodded then climbed out of the structure. Toothless followed after her, but he gave Hiccup a rather annoyed look as though it was his fault that the fun ended. Hiccup returned with a confused grimace then climbed out himself.

By the time they finally got back to the village, everyone who was going was waiting with their dragons at the Academy. From a distance, Hiccup could see Astrid pace back and forth, worry planted on her face. But as soon as she noticed the trio walking up to them she sighed in relief.

"Thank the gods." she said. "I was afraid you guys got attacked or something. Wait a minute." she frowned. "Why are you all wet?" she looked the princess up and down.

Merida shrugged. "Toothless an' ah just had a small water fight."

Astrid chuckled at her then went over to Stormfly. The dragon purred as she stroked her nose, then the viking proceeded to mount her back.

"Well," said Astrid, "since we don't have time to teach you how to ride, it looks like you'll have to ride with someone. You can choose whoever you want."

Merida turned, studying the choices before her. She had no idea how she would ride with a two-headed dragon, and the twins didn't seem the safest since they were fighting already. Snotlout's dragon seemed alright, but she still wasn't so sure about Snotlout himself. Fishlegs and Meatlug seemed harmless, but once again she had no idea how she would ride with him. She was half-surprised to see Stoick there, but as soon as she made eye-contact with him he gave her a harsh glare. She quickly looked away and decided to avoid eye contact from that time forward.

Astrid began to worry. It was obvious Merida didn't like the idea of flying or even dragons at all.

"Hey," she called, and Merida looked in her direction, "why don't you ride with Hiccup? You seem to be the most comfortable with Toothless, and we can all assure you he will never let you fall."

The princess turned toward Hiccup who had already mounted the Night Fury. He gave a small shrug with a smile as if to say, "Why not?"

Merida sighed, it was true Toothless was probably the only dragon she

really trusted, but for some reason, she couldn't bring herself to trust him into taking her into the air. But there was no other choice. She wouldn't mind riding with Astrid, but the Nadder underneath her was too intimidating.

She walked up to the dragon, but then she wondered how on earth she was supposed to mount it. With Angus she could just throw herself over his back, but there seemed to be a large, black wing in the way. Seeing her dilemma, Hiccup offered her his arm. Hesitantly, she took it. He helped her up on the dragon's back, then handed her something leather.

"Here. Fasten this around you." he said.

She took it, but then gave a quizzical look. It seemed like a belt, but there were two straps hanging off the sides that had metal rings at the end of them.

"It's a spare harness." Hiccup explained, "That way you won't fall off as easily."

The princess nodded, then buckled the harness around her waist. After she was done, Hiccup took the rings and connected them to two hooks poking out of the side of the saddle. Merida gave a small grimace that her life is being protected by a bit of leather and metal, but it was still better than nothing.

"Alright, everyone ready?" Astrid called, and Merida looked up to see everyone on their dragons, nodding and a few of them giving a loud 'yeah'. Hiccup then put on his helmet and leaned down with his dragon, ready for takeoff. Merida's heart began to beat faster and faster.

Suddenly she felt her stomach drop all the way to her toes. Just as Hiccup had done years ago, Merida wrapped her arms tightly around his waist at takeoff. She had gone riding with Angus many times, but the speed of a horse was nothing compared to a dragon. The wind cut right through her, and she could see them rise higher and higher. Terrified, she shut her eyes closed. Eventually her body began to relax as she got used to the velocity, but when she opened her eyes again, all she could see under her feet was the vast ocean far below them. Her heart raced in fear.

Then she looked ahead.

The horizon was visible, and they seemed closer to the clouds than the water. She took in a deep breath as she stared in awe at such a sight. Daring herself to look down again, her eyes drifted to the water. But instead of shrinking in fear, she laughed at how high they were. Slowly she let go of the man in front of her. The speed, the thrill of it all allowed her heart to jump. Smiling, she allowed her arms to fly out free as though they were wings. Closing her eyes again, she cursed at herself for being so scared before. She remembered doing this with Angus pretending she really could fly, but this time when she opened her eyes she wasn't disappointed of being on the ground.

She couldn't describe the feeling that surged through her entire body. She could feel the air slip gently through her fingers, and her hair flew straight back, allowing the wind to touch her

neck.

Looking ahead of herself she found the word for it. The word that would forever describe the feeling of flight:

Freedom.

22. Chapter 22

****First Stop****

Merida enjoyed the entire flight. She would laugh and scream as Toothless dipped and rose. Occasionally she would ask questions like, "How fast can he go?" or "What if he gets too tired?"

But the fun was over, and now they had to set up camp. The island they stopped at looked small from high above, only consisting of a small forest, a sandy beach and through the trees they could see hints of freshwater. Once they had all unpacked and gotten a fire started, then sun was down and there were no other sources of light besides the moon and a few flickering stars.

But even the peace of the evening couldn't reduce the tension in the group. As soon as they kicked up the sand Stoick never let Merida out of his sight. Even when she offered to get firewood or find the spring they saw, he refused and told someone else to do it.

The only thing she could really do was inventory with Astrid to make sure they had everything they brought. Besides the food they brought, Astrid packed some dragon nip and of course, her mother's axe. The only other things Merida really brought was a broadsword and a bow with a set of twenty arrows along with some materials to treat her burns.

With nothing else to do, the princess sat down in the sand and stared at the campfire. She hated not being able to do anything and her muscles itched, but with Stoick's eyes following her wherever she went, there wasn't anything she could do.

Soon Hiccup was back from fishing with Toothless and the two of them dumped a bunch of fish down for the dragons. Meanwhile everyone else's dinner was put over the fire to cook and they also handed out some dry bread.

After they all ate, Astrid stood up and held out a hand to Merida.

"C'mon. We should probably go check your burns."

The princess looked over to Stoick first, but he didn't object. But his deathly glare didn't cease. Hesitantly she got up and followed Astrid into the woods. They stopped when they came to the spring. A bit awkwardly, Merida took off her tunic and allowed Astrid to help her take off some of the bandages.

"You seem to be getting better." Astrid said. "Do any of them hurt too badly?"

"Not really." Merida was used to cuts, burns or any other sort of

injury from her many misadventures back home.

Astrid removed her thick gloves and taking a clean cloth, dipped it in the cool water and lightly dabbed the darkened skin.

"What a pity." she said as she worked. "It looks like you had such beautiful skin."

Merida sighed. "Ye sound like mah mother."

Astrid chuckled a bit, then continued working. "So what's your mother like then?"

"Wellâ€|she's refined, beautiful, but very strict. As th' diplomat of th' land, she holds high expectations fer me."

"Wow, that's not how I pictured her at all. Since you mentioned she was the one who killed that demon bear, I thought you'd describe her as a warrior or fighter."

Merida's eyes drifted. "Only when she's protectin' th' things that are most important ta her."

Astrid simply nodded in understanding. She smiled gently as she worked; a bit amazed how quickly Merida was able to heal. The burns weren't too bad to begin with, but there were a few blisters here and there. There were also a few places where the skin began to peel.

After they had covered all the burns, they only wrapped some of the most damaged areas again and Merida was able to get dressed again.

Though, as they cleaned up their mess, something on Astrid's hand caught Merida's eye.

"That's a beautiful ring, ah never saw it before."

Astrid looked at her hand, and was reminded of the special connection to the ring. It was a simple gold, but there was a shining ruby in the middle with smaller diamonds on either side of it.

The viking opened her mouth to explain it, but she hesitated. Thoughts ran through her mind, but eventually she found it in herself to trust this girl.

"My fiancÃ© gave it to me."

Merida's blue eyes widened out of shock. "Yer getting' married?"

Astrid sighed. "Yeah, though no one was supposed to know until later."

A huge smile crept onto Merida's face. "Yer getting' married! Crivens, this is a big step, are ye sure yer ready fer this?"

Astrid shrugged. "Well, yeah. I mean I love him, we've known each other a long time, and when he proposed I knew it was time."

The princess beamed. Normally at any sign of marriage, she'd hide away, but when it came to others' marriage out of love, she couldn't help but be excited. After all, it was all she wanted since the last time suitors came to her door.

"Well, even if we've only known each other fer a few days, ah'm excited fer ye. Ah hope ye have a happy marriage."

Astrid smiled. "Thanksâ€|but could you do me a favor? We didn't want anyone else to know till later."

Merida nodded softly. "Don't worry. Ah won't tell anyone."

****Back at Camp****

While the two girls were gone, not much changed at the campsite. Ruffnut already got out her bedroll and tried to sleep, but from all the noise Tuffnut and Snotlout were making, there was no way anyone could sleep. Occasionally she would throw a rock or something at them, but it didn't help.

Meanwhile Stoick sat next to his son, eating another fish. The dragons had gone to sleep like Ruffnut, but they too had little luck. After a while, Stoick leaned over to the brunette next to him and whispered,

"Son, we need to talk."

Hiccup looked up at his father. "Dadâ€|really? Now?"

"It's not about that. It's about our Scottish companion."

Hiccup leaned back. He thought they had put this matter to rest, but obviously Stoick wanted to argue some more.

"Fine." there was an obvious amount of annoyance in Hiccup's voice.

The two men stood up and walked away from the camp area. They trudged in the sand till Stoick finally spoke up.

"I don't trust this plan, Hiccup."

"Dad! I get it! Okay? You don't trust Merida, but you said you would go along with what I decided!"

"It's not just that princess, Hiccup. Do you realize this could all be a trap? She may be leading us right where she wants."

Hiccup stopped walking and looked straight into his father's eyes.

"Dad! First off, this whole plan was my idea! Second, Merida would never do that! I know her, dad! I know her family, I know the land, I even know the family of one of the Lords! And I know that neither she nor any of her people would do this!"

"People change over time, son. Just look at how much our tribe changed over a few weeks after you and Toothless battled the Red Death."

"Yeah, but we changed for the better, dad! What you're suggesting is that they would backstab anyone they come across, and they're not like that!"

"See, this is EXACTLY how your mother died. We trusted them, we let our guard down, and we paid the price for it."

"Dad, I said before, they're not the ones to killed mom. It was someone else." Hiccup's voice began to choke up.

"They're all the same, Hiccup!"

"No, they're not, and even if they were, you'd have to forgive them, or at least Merida."

"And why would I forgive the murderers?"

"Because even when she found out I was a viking, even when she could have dug an arrow straight into my chest, she didn't. Not to mention she saved my life! That's worth forgiving for!"

Stoick's eyebrows were more furrowed than they had ever been before. Through the entire conversation his voice was harsh and loud. But it continued no more. Shaking his head, he turned and kept walking away.

Hiccup sighed and plopped himself down in the sand. He didn't want to argue any more. He was tired of arguing. He could hear someone coming up to him from behind, but he didn't turn his head.

A familiar black dragon curled up around him, keeping him warm. Placing a hand on the Night Fury, Hiccup leaned down and rested his head down on the scaly hide.

This is going to be a long trip

23. Chapter 23

****Tears****

When Hiccup woke up, all he could taste was sand. Unfortunately he had the misfortune of sleeping with his mouth open, so when he sat up he could feel the small grains fall off his face and roll around his tongue. He continuously spat onto the ground, but there was no getting rid of it. He leaned back against Toothless who was still curled around him and observed his surroundings. Only one other person was awake, and of all things, they seemed to be making a sand castle by the water.

Using nothing but her hands and a small cup, Merida dug through the sand and built her structure. As he approached, Hiccup could recognize what she was building.

"Is that DunBroch castle?" he said, sitting down next to her.

She looked up quickly. "Oh, sorry ah didn't know anyone was awake yet."

"It's okay, I only just woke up."

She nodded and continued working. "Well, yes this is mah home. Ta be honest ah didn't think ye'd recognize it."

"I spent a good while there. And you should know I'm one for details."

She gave a small chuckle, but that was all he was going to get. She no longer laughed or talked, Hiccup could barely even hear her breathe. For a while, it seemed like it wasn't even Merida anymore. His mind drifted to his and Stoick's argument from the previous night.

Hiccup closed his eyes and shook his head. No. There is no way Merida would do such a thing. But there was no denying she was different. When they were together in DunBroch, she would come to the smithy and talk his ear off. Or she'd at least ask questions while they were alone in the forest. But now it seemed like she was treating him like a complete stranger.

"Well, you look terrible." he said jokingly, expecting a glare or a punch in the arm.

But she just gave a small nod. "Aye. Ah haven't slept at all. Not since th' meetin' before we left."

"Oh." sighing, he tried to hide his disappointment with a forced smile. Not that it mattered since she still didn't look up. Without saying another word, he tried his best to help her with her castle. Obviously he didn't remember every detail, but he could carve out the courtyard with the single well by the front gates, and the path he crossed every day when on his way to the smithy. Meanwhile, Merida tried her best to keep the stables from collapsing. After they had finished, Hiccup found a few small twigs as Merida ripped some healthy leaves in half and they created flags to decorate the tower.

Satisfied with their work, Merida gave a half smile. But it soon faded and she turned to look at the horizon.

"Do you think mah family's dead?" she said suddenly.

Hiccup tried to give her a reassuring smile. "Of course not. Dragon raids don't last too long, and your kingdom is filled with skilled hunters. I'm sure they're all fine."

"But why did mah mum send me away? She'd never let me go on a ship fer any reason before, so why now?"

Hiccup opened his mouth to comfort her, but she kept on going.

"And mah ship was attacked by pirates. Who knows what happened to the boys? Who knows if they're still alive?"

A lump caught in her throat and Hiccup could see tears forming in her eyes. Her shoulders began to shake and she tried to sniff back the tears but all it did was make them fall.

Suddenly Hiccup flashed back to four years ago. The first time he saw

Merida cry. Like then, it was over a family member; her mother. He reached out to grab her shoulder; to let her know she wasn't alone; that everything was alright, but just as he was about to touch her she stood and swallowed all her tears away. Wiping away the small drips on her cheeks on her sleeve she put on a calm face and she forced away the color from her cheeks.

This was worse. Now he could tell she was in pain, but she decided to hide it. But she wouldn't let him confront her about it. As soon as she could, she turned and began walking down the beach. With her massive hair covering her head, there was no way he could tell if she was crying or not.

To make matters worse, everyone else began to wake up. All it took was for one twin to wake up and soon there was enough noise to wake up every creature on the entire island.

****In the Air****

Thankfully, Merida seemed to be back to her normal self once they launched into the sky again. The thrill of flight never ceased to amaze her, and after a while, she just leaned back to lie against the dragon's bumpy back but she didn't care. She just allowed the air to whip around her hair and into her lungs.

Suddenly she could see a blue dragon fly up beside Toothless out of the corner of her eye.

"Hey, Hiccup!" called Astrid atop Stormfly, "Do you think we could stop by the Meathead Islands?"

Hiccup lifted his mask so he could speak better. "Yeah, that's actually our next stop for the night."

Merida sat up. "Why are they called 'Meathead Islands'?"

"It's where the viking Meathead Tribe lives. They're allies of ours, so they should give us refuge for the night." Hiccup said through the rushing wind.

"Hey, do you think Thuggory will be there?" called Tuffnut.

"Be quiet you!" Astrid called, then looked forward with a beaming smile.

****Meathead Islands****

If anyone ever says all vikings are the same, then they'd be lying. True, they're all mostly arrogant, prideful pirates, but each tribe has its own perks. Berk was the first tribe to tame dragons, but with trades and treaties, such culture spread. The Meathead Tribe was one of the very next to adopt such tactics, and now they have the capabilities to defend the crown jewel of their tribe: The Meathead Public Library.

Normally vikings wouldn't take time to sit down and read, but the Meatheads took pride in their collection. To steal from the library would result in being attacked by a Driller-Dragon. There was nothing much special about these dragons, but they roamed all over the South Island of the Meathead lands. They are also quite obedient, but their

lethal horn at the end of their nose made them quite intimidating when vikings still fought dragons. Now they guard the library, ready to pounce anyone holding a book.

Most of the time the library stayed empty, but today there one Meathead viking sitting and actually reading. The book was stolen from an Outcast ship who had recorded their journey through a hurricane. The viking studied how their ship was nearly torn apart, and read the author's steady madness fall through the pages.

This viking's name was Thuggory. Like Hiccup, he was the son of a chief. However his father, Mogadon had not given up his seat quite yet. If stubbornness could take human form, it would be Chief Mogadon. But Thuggory didn't mind, he instead took the time to study and try to be the best chief he could when the time came.

He had spent most of his day in this building, going over past battles, enchanting tales, and even skimming through a book Hiccup had given to him called "How to Train Your Dragon."

But his studying was interrupted when someone burst through the doors.

"Thuggory! Chief Hiccup is here! He's brought others as well!"

Thuggory looked up, surprised. Berk was far enough that this would be no ordinary visit.

Perhaps he thought to himself, Perhaps it's finally time.

Excited, he ran out the door, only to be met with a Driller-Dragon who nearly took his head off. Realizing he still had the book he was reading in his hand, he threw the leather-bound back through the doors and made his way through the village.

Finally, he reached the travelling party. Recognizing the black Night Fury, Thuggory ran up to Hiccup and gave him a large hug. Thuggory was still the same size as a usual viking, so one can only imagine how terrified Hiccup looked when he came running up to him.

"Good to see you!" beamed Thuggory, and he let go. Hiccup gasped for breath. "So what bring you here?" he continued, looking around.

"Listen, Thuggory. It's not what you think, at least not yet." Hiccup said, but the large viking wasn't listening.

As soon as his eye caught hold of someone else, he rushed to greet them. He ran up to Astrid excitedly, and she returned his embrace with a just as big, if not bigger, hug.

Hiccup sighed and waited till they were done. When they finally released each other, Hiccup grabbed Thuggory's shoulder.

"The only reason we're here is because we need a place to sleep for the night."

Thuggory's eyes widened. He looked back at Astrid who simply gave a

half-smile and nodded.

"Then you're not-â€|Wait where are you going then?"

Merida was still waiting by Toothless, scratching behind his large ears. Hiccup went over and grabbed her hand, leading her to Thuggory.

"Merida, this is Thuggory; son of Chief Mogadon. Thuggory, this is Princess Merida. She's got a dragon problem at her home, so we're going to try and fix it."

Thuggory gave a slight bow. "Princess, huh? Where do you live?"

Merida returned his bow with a small curtsy. "Ah'm from Scotland, of the clan DunBroch."

The viking froze at 'Scotland'. He looked over to Hiccup, then Astrid, then all over the rest of the party. Everyone either nodded or shrugged.

"Scotlandâ€|Well, alright. I don't have a problem with it, but if you recall, I'm not exactly in charge here. C'mon, I'll take you to see my dad."

They followed Thuggory past houses and shops, chattering about what was the same and what was different than Berk. Occasionally someone they knew would call out and greet them, but most of the residents kept to themselves.

Finally, they arrived at a very large building made of wood. It stood taller than any Berk house and its rectangular shape made it wider than any other building around. Stepping inside, everyone could see it was mostly empty, but there were a few large men surrounding a small wooden table. Torches lit the room, though there were a few streaks of light coming from the sun, proving the age of the building. The layout reminded Hiccup of the Great Hall in Berk. Though there were no columns and there were many more decorations on the wall, most of which were stolen relics or treasures proving the great worth of the Meathead Tribe.

As soon as the group entered, all the men turned to see who had entered. After staring through the bright light pouring in from the door, one of the men smiled brightly and walked forward, arms stretched.

"Heil, Stoick!" he said, and embraced the former chief.

Mogadon was large and burly like Stoick, but he was a bit shorter. He also had a large, scratchy beard that stuck out in all directions and his mustache covered his entire mouth. His untamed, dark hair poked out from under his horned helmet while his dark, piercing eyes peered out from behind his bushy eyebrows.

"Mogadon, it's good to see you, though it is customary to greet the chief of a visiting party first." replied Stoick.

Hiccup stepped forward, holding out his hand hesitantly. Mogadon stood there dumbly for a moment, then laughed and picked up Hiccup,

giving him a large hug. Merida could've sworn she heard some bones crack. When he released, Hiccup gasped for breath and nearly fell over.

"Wouldn't he know Hiccup was chief already?" Merida whispered over to Astrid.

Astrid giggled a bit. "Yeah, but his memory's so bad, he probably forgot what he had for breakfast this morning."

"So what can I do for you?" Mogadon asked.

"Is it alright, if we spend the night here? We're on a long journey." Hiccup said, still out of breath.

The old chief laughed again. "Of course! Anything for the chief of Berk!" he laughed again, as if the idea of Hiccup being chief amused him. "This was such a sudden surprise, I thought it was time for the wedding!"

"What wedding?" inquired Stoick, confused.

But no one got to hear more. Everyone was either pulled or pushed out the door by Astrid.

****That Night****

Mogadon decided the sudden visit was good enough reason to celebrate, so most of the evening was spent with music and dancing and laughter. But one character removed herself from the festivities, but since she didn't know her way around the village, she simply sat on the docks they landed on, and stared at the waves glimmering in the moonlight.

Merida sighed and tried to keep her attention away from the distant screams of laughter. She didn't want to celebrate. There was nothing to celebrate. Just a few weeks prior she had seen her home burn at the hands of the monstrous animals these people kept as pets. Letting her curls cover her face, she put her head down. She didn't want to think about it, but there was no stopping herself. Since it happened, the attack was all she thought and dreamt about. Gulping down a tear, she looked back up at the sky and tried to let the moisture drain back into her eyes.

At that moment, someone came to sit by her.

"How come you're here all by yourself?" said Astrid, plopping herself down on the dock.

Merida shrugged. "Ah guess ah'm jus' not used ta viking parties."

Astrid laughed. "Are they that much different than Celtic celebrations."

Merida looked back and saw a few dancing bodies in the distance. "Actually, no. Ah'm jus' not in th' mood right now."

"Oh." The viking tried to give her a reassuring smile, but there was a definite amount of pain behind Merida's silence.

"So," said Merida before Astrid could say anything more, "Ah'm goin' ta guess that th' weddin' Chief Mogadon was talkin' about was yers."

Astrid laughed again. "I made it that obvious, huh? Yeah, of all the things for him to remember and blurt out, it had to be that."

"Why don't ye want anyone ta know yet?"

"Well, it's just that we wanted it to be a surprise. And we still have a lot to work out and we don't want everyone harassing us about it."

Merida gave a small chuckle. "But why would ye tell Mogadon of all people? If anyone, ah would imagine ye'd tell Hiccup's dad."

Astrid narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

The princess blinked at her. "Wellâ€|he's Hiccup's dad."

"And?" Astrid cocked her head, confused.

"W-â€|Well why'd ye tell Mogadon?"

"Because he's the father of the groom."

Merida's eyes widened so large, they seemed as big a viking shield. "Yer marryin' Thuggory?"

Astrid began to laugh. "Yes, I'm marrying Thuggory."

"B-but what about Hiccup? Ah mean, he told me on how close th' two of ye were, ah thought he was th' one ye'd be marryin'."

The viking stopped laughing. "Hiccup said that? When?"

"Years ago when he was in Scotland."

Astrid sighed. "Then that would explain it."

"Explain what?"

The viking looked out to the sea, just as Merida had when she first sat on the docks. "When Hiccup came back, I was so happy. I'll admit I loved Hiccup more than anything, but after a while of him being home, he seemedâ€|different."

"Different how?"

"He just seemed so distant. Not physically, he would always come to the Academy and lead in rescue missions or start lessons, but whenever there was a spare moment he wasn't talking about dragons, he would stay silent. I suppose I should've given him a chance later, but I got fed up with it. I felt like I was giving him all the love he deserved but he wasn't giving me anything. So I broke it off."

Merida looked at her sadly. She had wanted to experience what love was like, but now she saw how painful it could be too.

"Was it hard afterward?"

Astrid shrugged. "For Hiccup I have no idea, but for me not so much. I had met Thuggory long before we broke up, and he made me feel happier than anyone ever didâ€¦even Hiccup."

"When did ye meet him?"

"Actually, I met him while I was looking for Hiccup. See, when he went missing all those years ago, I went with Toothless to try to find him. We went from island to island looking for him, and even landed on Meathead Island. Thuggory took us in for the night and gave us food and a warm bed. After we left Meathead Island, it wasn't long after that that I had to turn back and head home. But Toothless never stopped looking."

"Did ye know then that ye'd be marryin' him?"

"No." she chuckled. "But I never forgot his kindness."

Merida gave her a warm smile. "So then, besides Mogadon, who else knows about th' weddin'?"

"Well, excluding you, only Hiccup. Normally Mogadon would be the one to perform the wedding since he is the chief of the groom's homeland, but we wanted Hiccup to do it. The only problem is, Hiccup would have to talk to Mogadon about it, and Hiccup's also not the best public speaker. I had been trying to talk to him for the past few weeks so that I would know he'd make sure the ceremony went according to plan."

The princess gave a small chuckle. "Hiccup would be th' one ta mess up a weddin'."

"You know speaking of Hiccup, I noticed you two haven't exactly been spending any time together at all."

"Aye, is there somethin' wrong with that?"

Astrid shrugged. "Well, you knew each other years ago, I thought you'd maybe sit down and talk for a while and just spend time together."

Merida gave a soft sigh. "If ah was still that wee lassie from four years agoâ€¦aye, ah'd sit an' talk. But time has changed me."

"Let's hope you changed for the better though." Astrid nudged her arm lightly.

But the princess didn't respond after that. She remained quiet as she listened to the distant sounds of celebration.

24. Chapter 24

****Adding More to the Group****

By early morning, everyone managed to wake up and eat so they could leave in time to reach DunBroch by that evening.

Hiccup groaned and stretched his back in the crisp, early morning air. After drinking a bit too much, both Mogadon and Stoick dragged him into dancing all through the night. Fortunately, Thuggory managed to pry him away from them and allow him to get some sleep.

Toothless bounded toward him, fed and ready to go, but the dragon would have to be disappointed. Hiccup looked around to see most of them ready, but this time Astrid and Stormfly were missing.

"Perhaps they jus' went out fer a ride." Merida said when he inquired about Astrid's whereabouts.

Hiccup sighed. "Well, if you see her, tell her we need to go soon."

"Hey, Hiccup! How much longer do we have to wait?" called Snotlout.

"Yeah, Barf and Belch are starting to growâ€¦you knowâ€¦cause it's getting so lateâ€¦"

Everyone stared at Tuffnut blankly. But he still had a big grin on his face as though his joke was funny.

"I found her!" called Fishlegs, and he pointed at the end of the docks they stood at.

Astrid was walking up with Thuggory by her side and Stormfly. But there was one other dragon following them.

It was a Monstrous Nightmare like Hookfang, but its skin was darker all around and had a purplish hue. It also had shorter spikes on its back with longer and straighter horns. Hookfang also had a habit of walking with its head close to the ground, but this dragon walked tall as if proud to be a dragon.

"Hey, we need to go now." Hiccup said to them as they approached.

"Is it alright if I come with you?" said Thuggory, who stroked his dragon's neck.

Hiccup raised an eyebrow, giving a worried look. Both Astrid and Thuggory looked at him with pleading eyes. Finally he gave a sigh and nodded.

"Fine, but don't think of this as a fun trip or anything. We have a serious job to do."

Thuggory nodded. "I understand, Hiccup." He raised a large hammer that hung on his belt. "That's why I'm bringing this. Plus, if a fight is needed, Killer is ready for the job."

Killer, the Monstrous Nightmare spread his wings majestically then lowered his head to rub against his rider.

"Woah, he brought a hammer!" exclaimed Ruffnut.

"Wait, how come you wouldn't let me bring my hammer?" complained

Tuffnut.

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "No one said you couldn't bring it."

"Yes, you did. You said we just needed our dragons."

"No, I just said we needed our dragons. I didn't say you couldn't bring your hammer!"

"See? You said it again."

Hiccup groaned and gave a defeated sigh. "Whatever, you have your axe. Is everyone ready to go now?"

Everyone nodded or gave a mumble of agreement. All except Stoick who silently climbed atop Skull Crusher.

After mounting on Toothless, Hiccup helped Merida up. But out of the corner of his eye he caught Thuggory give Astrid a small kiss on the forehead. He had seen this sort of action before, but every time he did, he could feel the blood drain from his body. But he shook it off, as he always did, and called for the takeoff.

****Catching Up****

Most of the ride was peaceful and quiet, except Astrid filling Thuggory in on the small details. The air was clear, and there were less clouds in the sky. They stopped only once to eat, but now the sun was setting again and they either needed to find a place to stop, or fly all the rest of the way to DunBroch.

"Listen, guys. We probably don't have time to stop." called Hiccup as they flew in a close formation.

"I'm tired." complained Ruffnut.

"Plus our dragons need a rest." called Fishlegs. "Either we stop for the night or they crash as soon as we get there."

"Hiccup, we don't even know how far away it is. You're the only one who's been there and that was years ago." said Thuggory.

Astrid sighed. "Why don't we ask Merida?"

"Fine, Merida what do you think?" Hiccup said as he tried to turn, but a weight on his back stopped him.

Merida had fallen asleep and propped herself on his back as they flew. Hiccup called her name, but all she did was murmur a bit. He even locked Toothless' tail fin open and turned around to shake her awake, but her eyes never opened.

Sighing, he looked over to the others. "She fell asleep."

They started laughing a bit, but due to the obvious general consent, they decided to find a place to stop for the night.

The sun had fully set and the sky was completely dark before they found any hint of an island or someplace they could sleep. Eventually they found a small island that had no beach, but there were a few

cliffs where they could land. There was scarcely anything on the island except a few trees and a small pool of fresh water.

As soon as they landed, everyone crashed down and fell asleep, especially the dragons. Exhausted from flying all day, they quickly heated up a small spot to keep themselves warm and fell down to sleep.

Upon landing, Hiccup jumped off Toothless and was about to lie down when he remembered Merida was still asleep. Dragging his feet, he undid her harness and was about to lift her off Toothless when she woke up.

Her eyes went wide as though she just came out of a dream and stared into nothing as reality caught up to her. She inhaled deeply before she realized they weren't flying anymore.

"Are we there?" she said, looking around.

"No," said Hiccup offering her a hand, "we're just staying the night. But we should be there tomorrow."

She nodded sleepily, then ignoring his hand, slid off the ebony dragon. With all the weight finally off his back, Toothless found a soft piece of earth and went to sleep. Meanwhile, Merida stretched her muscles and allowed herself to awaken fully. Noticing everyone else going to sleep, she turned to Hiccup and said,

"I'm goin' ta stay up fer a while." Then she went over to the Cliffside and sat down, her legs dangling over the edge.

Groggily, Hiccup nodded and walked over to Toothless, who allowed him to use the dragon as a pillow. Setting his head on the thick, scaly skin, the chief finally got to sleep.

Flashes of memories and the subconscious flew past Hiccup's mind, but when he woke, he wouldn't remember any of them. Only one dream will hold his mind long enough for him to remember, and it was of a place he had not seen in years.

He could see a great, big, stone castle filled with carvings and skins and weapons and artifacts. He could smell the sweet air that flowed through trees; he could feel the chilly winter wrap around him as he felt a piece of snow hit him in the face. He could hear laughter—he could hear crying—

He opened his eyes to remember it was all a dream. It was still dark out, and the stars shone brightly next to the crescent moon. Underneath him, a Night Fury grumbled in deep breaths. Turning over, Hiccup tried to go back to sleep, but a familiar noise caught his attention.

It was—he was—hearing. Someone was actually crying.

Sitting up, Hiccup saw Merida under the moonlight, still sitting at the edge of the cliff, but her figure was shaking. Slowly so as not to alert her or wake anyone, Hiccup got up and silently walked toward her.

Hearing him just a few feet away, Merida quickly wiped her tears and

removed any sign of turmoil. Still not saying a word, Hiccup sat down next to her, allowing his legs to dangle over the ocean as she did.

"You okay?" he said.

"Aye, why wouldn't ah be?" she replied, still looking ahead.

"C'mon, Merida talk to me."

"There's nothin' ta talk about."

Hiccup sighed. "Yes, there is and you know it." He was starting to get irritated.

She didn't say anything. Pulling up her legs, she stood and started to walk away.

"Hey!" Hiccup stood up and followed her. "We could always talk before. Actually, I remember listening, you did all the talking."

She didn't stop. Hiccup eventually had to grab her shoulder and forcefully turn her around.

"Merida!"

She didn't look at him, instead she focused on the ground or past his shoulder.

"What's the matter with you? You're treating me like a complete stranger."

She turned away from him again, but this time she didn't walk away. Even though he couldn't see it, she bit her lip as she tried to fight back tears.

Hiccup didn't know what else to do. It was like the time she nearly fell into a freezing lake and wouldn't talk about it afterwards.

"Meridaâ€¦" he said, "what's wrong?"

She turned back to him, but she didn't bother hiding her tears.

"Before ah left, mah mother an' ah got into an argument. Ah barely remember what it was about, probably over me fightin'. That's what it's always about nowadays. But ah said some pretty horrible things ta herâ€¦an' nowâ€¦she might be gone."

Hiccup opened his mouth then closed it again. He gently placed his hands on her shoulders and bent down to look her in the eyes.

"Merida. Your mother is fine. I know it. I'm sure all of them are fine, even your brothers. They're all too stubborn for something as simple as a dragon raid. In fact, knowing them, they're probably waiting for you to come home now with a big celebration."

Unfortunately, she still wouldn't look at him. She simply nodded and sniffed away at her tears.

"Ah'm sorry, Hiccup."

He raised an eyebrow. "Sorry for what?"

Wiping her face on her sleeve, she looked up at him.

"Ah was angry with ye. Ah was mad that ye left an' never came back. Now ah see ye had so much ta do, an' ye had yer own life in Berk. Ah shouldn't have been so selfish."

Hiccup's arms dropped to his sides and he looked down in shame.

"You never forgot, did you?" he said quietly.

She looked a bit stunned. "Well, no. How could ah? No one had ever been so nice ta me as ye were."

Hiccup felt sick to his stomach. Tearing away from her, he went over to the edge of the cliff again. Suddenly his mouth never felt so dry and yet cool sweat began to form on his brow. He looked back to her a few times, but then turned away shaking his head. Confused, Merida walked toward him.

"Noâ€|" he said. "No, you should be mad at me."

"Why?"

He looked at her again, but he had a pained expression on his face. Finally he opened his mouth.

"Because I forgot."

Running his hands over his face and through his hair, he took a deep breath.

"Iâ€|I didn't at first butâ€|I just got distracted." he shrugged his shoulders as he tried to think of a good excuse, but none came.

"Ohâ€|" Merida stood there for a moment, a bit hurt but she swallowed hard and nodded slowly.

"Butâ€|but I recognized you as soon as I saw you in the Great Hall." he rambled, "And I never lost your necklace!" Grabbing a thin cord from around his neck, he pulled the necklace from under his leather armor. He held it out as she raised her hands and let it drop gently into her fingers.

She fingered it as though it would break, then handed it back to him.

"It's alright, ah understand. Ye don't have ta explain yerself, Hiccup."

Even though her words spoke comfort, there was an evident amount of pain on her face and her hands trembled softly, making the necklace

swing.

After gulping down his guilt, he pushed her arm into her chest.

"It's yours. You keep it."

She shook her head and took his hand. Before he could draw it away she clamped the necklace into his hand and pushed it back toward him. Without another word she turned and began to walk away.

"No, Merida. You should take it. It belongs to you." he called after her.

Turning, she shook her head. She no longer trembled and the only evidence of her crying was stained on her cheeks.

"Not yet. We haven't made it ta DunBroch, an' ye still have a promise ta keep."

Hiccup paused, then he smiled.

"What?" Merida said.

"There's the Merida I remember."

She lowered her eyelids and raised an eyebrow.

"If yer lookin' fer th' same girl ye knew four years ago, then yer lookin' in th' wrong place. Ah'm ten times smarter than when ye met me an' twice as fast. An' ah'll jus' say mah skills in th' bow an' th' sword have increased much more than ye could imagine."

"Oh really?"

"Aye, an' ah'll prove it to ye."

Merida walked over silently to Stormfly's pack and removed two swords. Throwing one to Hiccup, she walked over to a clearing far enough away from the sleeping vikings.

"I'll have you know my sword skills have gotten better too." Hiccup chuckled as he removed the scabbard from the blade and readied himself.

"Ah'll be th' judge of that." Merida smirked and took a stance.

At first they just circled each other, reading their movements. But Merida grew impatient and took a swing. He blocked it with ease and retaliated with his own strike. The princess parried his sword and took a step back to keep her balance.

Such actions of blocking and dodging continued for a while before Merida drove Hiccup toward the few trees on the island. Eventually she backed him against one of the trees and went for the strike. But she missed and hit the tree instead. Her strength was evident in how well the sword stuck to the tree, but now she had to abandon her weapon. Hiccup took a swing at her to get her away from it, and succeeded as she backed into the clearing again.

Without a weapon, she didn't stand much of a chance so Hiccup lowered his blade, ready to accept defeat. But Merida had other plans and grabbed a large branch near a tree.

Hiccup raised an eyebrow in disbelief, but raised his sword again anyway. Merida swung at him, and he was able to block her, but since her new weapon was so light, she was able to attack again quickly.

The branch smacked his face hard and he stumbled back in pain. While he recovered, she grabbed the hilt of his sword and elbowed him to make him release it. Gasping for breath, he fell over and coughed.

"Do ye yield?" she said, raising the blade to his chin.

But he smiled and shook his head. Merida raised an eyebrow, but she still kept her smug smirk. Taking a swing at him, Merida forced him to stumble backwards, but he somersaulted his way to his feet and took a device from his side. Clicking a button, a blade covered in flames emerged from the handle.

Merida's eyes widened and even stumbled back in fear as he swung the fire near her. For a while she just stood in awe of such a weapon, but eventually her smile returned.

"Now that's jus' not fair!"

****Morning Playtime****

By the time everyone woke up, the two were still sparring. They were getting slower as they had been at it for hours, but neither of them were willing to give in. When Astrid woke, she thought they were fighting for real and was about to intervene, but Thuggory held her back. He had been up for a while and was enjoying the show.

Soon bets started to go around, mostly because of Snotlout and Tuffnut. Astrid looked over to her fianc  and gave him a look. Recognizing her desire, he laughed and found a spare sword. Astrid got out her axe and the two of them began to playfully fight. Everyone else prepared and ate their breakfast while the two fights continued.

The only one who wasn't as amused was Stoick. He eyes Merida like a hawk, studying her movements and making sure she wasn't fighting to kill. But even he didn't pass up the chance to bet on his son, so he put on his most confident look and watched the spar.

Unfortunately for everyone, Toothless woke up from all the laughter and noise and tackled everyone to the ground, even the other dragons. He jumped from person to person and ran right between Astrid and Thuggory who spun around and fell to the ground. Then he pounced on both Hiccup and Merida at the same time, both their blades getting knocked to the side.

Hiccup starts laughing as Toothless licks his face, but Merida struggled to get the large beast off her. Turning his attention to the struggling girl, Toothless began licking Merida's face. She sputtered and tried to wipe his slimy saliva off, but it was no use. Eventually she just started laughing too.

Finally, they managed to push the Night Fury off, but the dragon bit the back of Hiccup's collar and dragged him around like a mother cat. Merida began to chortle at the pair of them, but mostly Hiccup as he struggled to get free.

Everyone joined in laughing at the chief as he was getting treated like a ragdoll, but as all good things; the fun had to end. The sun was getting higher and they needed to get moving.

After eating and packing up, they all mounted and shot off into the sky once again. After a few hours of shouting jokes at each other and yelling across the wind to speak to one another, Hiccup decided to do something he wasn't able to do for a while.

Smiling, Hiccup locked Toothless' tail fin and turned back to Merida.

"Hey, do you wanna take control for a while?" he said, grinning.

"What?" Merida looked shocked, but not as surprised as when he unstrapped himself and jumped off the dragon's back. Merida practically screamed when she saw him plunging down into the ocean, but she stopped when she noticed him pull something out of the sides of his clothes and glide. It appeared as though the viking made himself a pair of wings.

Everyone laughed at her reaction, but soon Merida was laughing with them. She laughed especially hard when she realized Hiccup needed help in getting back on Toothless. Skull Crusher dove down and Stoick grabbed his son just before he hit the water. Once he was safely on the Night Fury's back, Hiccup called to the others, announcing that they're probably very close to Scotland.

It was hours before they saw any sign of a mainland, but once they found it, neither Hiccup nor Merida was sure it was DunBroch.

****Meanwhile****

Though it was the middle of the day, the inside of DunBroch Castle was dark and depressing. All windows were shut tight and locked, and only a few torches that lined the walls were lit. There was no bustling activity as there usually was, and only a few servants walked around doing their chores.

One servant's hands trembled as they made their way through the corridors with a tray of food. She had worked in this castle for years, but never before had she felt so hopeless and scared. After walking slowly, she came upon her destination. Biting her lip, she shifted the weight of the tray and knocked on the door softly.

A low yet menacing reply came from behind it, and she entered.

"Ah have yer lunchâ€|Yer Majesty."

****There's No Place Like Home****

Merida couldn't believe her eyes. There was no doubt the land sitting on the water before them was DunBroch. The large, stone castle was clearly visible and the fields where they had their annual games and celebrations were planted by the forest where they should be. But the village and town that held the market, shops and homes were destroyed. Everything had been burned to the ground, and as they flew overhead, Merida could see her people huddling around each other to keep warm while others scrounged for food or mourned with lamenting cries over the remains.

The princess wanted to tear her eyes away from this horrifying sight, but the images burned themselves into her memory. Her peripheral forced her eyes toward her home, the place where she was born and grew into the woman she is now. Though now she could see dragons in its courtyards and towers, eating and fighting with one another. There were also a great amount of guards surrounding the castle walls, though none of them were familiar to her.

"Thisâ€¦can't be right. Are you sure this is the right place?" Astrid said, looking toward Hiccup and Merida.

Merida couldn't want anything more than to say 'no'. She didn't want to believe this was true, that this was her home.

"Yes." choked Hiccup, as he fought back tears, "We're here."

It didn't take long for someone to notice them, however. One of the guards spotted them approaching and called out to the others. Next thing the group knew, there was a great amount of arrows and what seemed like traps heading toward them. They had no choice but to veer away and head another direction. Luckily no one was trapped or hurt, so they all headed north, away from the deteriorating kingdom.

****DunBroch's New King****

A dark, looming figure grumbled darkly as he made his way to the outer wall of the castle. The many dragons that lounged around the halls moved quickly out of his way and scurried to empty rooms. He walked quickly yet harshly, his heavy boots made the walls echo his rapid pace. The doors banged the walls when he pushed them open, and all the men around him quickly shut their mouths and looked at him.

"What happened?" the man growled.

There was a bit of silence for a moment, but one guard in the back piped up.

"Master, there were some dragon riders heading this way, but we drove them off."

The large, dark man approached the guard. Everyone else got out of his way and even pushed some others to make a clear path.

"Drove them off?" he grumbled, "Why didn't you capture them?"

The guard opened his mouth, but no words came out. He simply stared

into the man's eyes and quivered. Next thing he knew, a large fist hit him across his face and he was thrown off the wall where many of his bones cracked.

No one stirred or made any sort of noise in fear of following the unfortunate guard. Though they all straightened up and listened when he spoke again, but luckily for them it was only two, simple words:

"FIND THEM!"

****The Heart Can Only Take So Much****

The party landed in the forest to the north, all of them silent. No one, not even the rambunctious twins, said a word. While everyone dismounted, Merida remained on Toothless, her limbs frozen. And yet she trembled in shock of everything she saw.

Noticing her lack of movement, Hiccup touched her hand. She jolted and sprung her hand back away from him, her eyes wide.

He tried his best to show his compassion, giving a sad, remorseful look. Then suddenly, Merida unstrapped herself and ran off into the forest.

"Merida!" he called, "Where are you going?"

But she didn't listen. She ran and ran until her lungs hurt, but she still kept running. There was no way she could believe what happened. Her home was burning and was being occupied by people she didn't know. It wasn't until Hiccup caught up with her and practically tackled her to the ground that she finally stopped. Luckily for him, as soon as he stopped her, she didn't fight him.

Wheezing and coughing, Merida sputtered and cried. Not needing any explanation, Hiccup hugged her and held her close, allowing her to soak his leathery armor in tears. She sobbed and cried out, breathing rapidly. All Hiccup could do was cry with her. He didn't try to shush her or make her stop; he just let his own tears fall into her wild hair.

He didn't want to believe it as much as she did. The smell of ash and the leveled village was what he least expected. Now they knew this was much bigger than their original suspicion. Invaders had taken control of Merida's home, but with dragons on their side.

Soon night was upon them, and Hiccup allowed Merida to cry herself to sleep. But once she had finally closed her eyes and was at peace, he still didn't want to move. He didn't want reality to come back to him.

Though, it wasn't long before they sent someone to fetch the pair of them. Just as Hiccup was about to drift into sleep himself, Stoick came strolling through the trees. He stopped for a moment to observe what was happening, and then called out to his son.

"Hiccup!" he said quietly. The chief looked back at his father wearily. "Time to go back, son."

Wiping his eyes and cheeks, Hiccup nodded. Seeing how tired he was,

Stoick went over and picked up Merida gently. Carrying the princess with care, the old viking lead the way back to where they set up camp.

****In the Dead of the Night****

Despite being very tired, Hiccup couldn't sleep at all. Even when he lied down on a soft patch of Earth and looked up at the fading stars, he felt no desire to sleep. Closing his eyes he tried to push away the images he just witnessed. But it was no use.

Suddenly, he heard a rustling in the camp. Sitting up, he saw Merida stirring in her sleep. He stared at her, wondering if he should wake her up. He could only imagine the horrors she was dreaming about, but he knew she needed her sleep.

Little to his knowledge she was dreaming about her family. She dreamed them together, then apart. They were happy, then sad. They were alive, thenâ€¦

A howling scream woke everyone in the camp. Everyone grabbed their weapons, and not a moment too soon. A large group of men surrounded them and began attacking. All of them carried swords and spears, poking trying to attack the dragons most of all.

At first when Merida woke, she was surprised. But then, as the fighting went on, a deep sense of hate and rage crept within the princess. She was tired of all this. She was tired of fighting, of violence, of everything.

Grabbing a sword she swung at one of the attackers. He blocked her attack, but her rage only made her all the more faster, all the more stronger. She attacked again and slashed his arm. He stumbled back, but she didn't resist and stabbed the end of her sword into his leg. He howled in pain, alerting everyone around.

Then the most unexpected thing happened. Merida froze and dropped her bloody sword.

"Cesan*?" she said. She had recognized his voice.

"Princess?" the wounded man said. This time everyone froze in confusion. They all simply stared at the man and the redhead.

"Princess Merida?" another man spoke. All of the attackers began to creep forward toward the Celtic Princess, eyeing her. But there was no mistaking that hair.

Now everything was clear. Now she saw their faces. Now she recognized every one of them. Looking through the dim moonlight, Merida allowed her eyes to blur with tears.

"Fionnlagh**, Sionn***, NiallghasÂ°â€¦|thank God yer alrightâ€¦|" She fell to the earth and sobbed more. If anyone thought she had no more tears to shed, they were wronged. All the men, including the one she injured caught her and laughed through their own tears.

"Th' princess has returned!" one cheered. Throwing his sword in the air, he gave a might whoop and screamed the news to all the world.

But his celebration was cut short by one who was still tangled in the princess' embrace.

"Shhhh! They're still out there." the one named Fionnlagh hissed.

Merida pulled away. "Who's out there? What's happened?"

Fionnlagh picked up his own sword and started toward the forest. "We can tell ye when we're safe." This particular man was tall, rather well-built, and had a face that marked him as just passing his middle-age years. He had blonde hair and a blonde mustache that connected to his beard.

"Though ah have to ask, Yer Highness." he said as the other men gathered themselves and grouped behind Fionnlagh. Cesan hobbled on one leg while being supported. "Who are these people an' what are ye doing with them." He raised his sword to the closest viking near him, which happened to be Fishlegs.

"Calm yerself, Fionnlagh." Merida sighed, "ah have been travellin' with Hiccup, Chief of the Hairy Hooligan Tribe in th' Northern Waters of Berk. They're...vikings..."

Every single man rose their weapons at the mention of 'vikings' and even took a few steps back. Hiccup couldn't tell if they were striking a stance to fight or backing away in fear. Immediately, Fionnlagh shoved Merida behind him, protecting her with his arm.

"Fiends!" he cried, "Ye may have deceived our princess, but we can see right through ye!"

Practically everyone rolled their eyes. Well, all except the dragons who all growled ferociously. Hiccup could hear Toothless gurgling to send off one of his plasma blasts, but he placed a hand on his friend's neck, trying to calm him.

"Look, we're just as confused as she is. We have no idea what's happening, and we would like to help." said Hiccup a little monotonously. "Here, I'll prove it." With the click of a button, Hiccup's flame sword retreated back into the handle and he threw it at the Scott's feet. Then he nodded to the rest of the group. At first, they looked at him in disbelief, but eventually they reluctantly threw their weapons to the ground.

Unfortunately, Fionnlagh didn't lower his weapon, and neither did any of the others.

"Help ma boab, Fionnlagh they're not here ta hurt us. Trust me." Merida said after pushing past his arm.

"Ye can never trust a viking, princess." he growled.

She put herself at the end of his blade. "Ah didn't say ta trust them, ah said ta trust me. Now lower yer blade."

"Princess, they-"

"That's an order!"

"Do ye even realize-"

"Ah said that's an order!"

Merida's harshness caused him to bite his tongue. Finally, he let his arm hang to his side with his blade out of any harm's way. The princess turned back to the vikings. Nodding at their scattered weapons on the floor, she allowed them to retrieve their belongings.

After they gathered their things, Hiccup nodded to Fionnlagh, expecting him to lead the way. But the Scott grabbed Merida's arm as she turned to follow as well.

"If ye knew what they've done, ye'd understand." he said sternly.

"If ye knew what they've done, ye'd treat them as ah do." Merida jerked her arm away.

Fionnlagh narrowed his eyes at her and looked even more sternly at the group of vikings and dragons behind her.

"Ah beg forgiveness from Her Highness." he said, "but ah will not lead vikings or dragons of any sort anywhere."

Merida sighed. "Well, ah'm not goin' ta leave them behind, so ye'll have ta go without us."

"Princess, ah also can't leave ye with these pirates!"

"Then they'll come too."

Fionnlagh's temper was obviously rising. His knuckles began to turn white as he tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword. But he knew what had to happen. Clenching his teeth, he let out a soft groan.

"Alright, they'll come too." he said. "name take back their weapons an' bind their hands."

"Fionnlagh!" Merida cried in protest. But he didn't listen to her any longer.

"If there's any extra rope, muzzle th' dragons as well." he said.

The men followed his instructions, taking every weapon they knew of from the vikings and then tying their hands with a coarse rope. At first, the Nordic group protested and began to fight back, but both Hiccup and Stoick shook their heads at them. Soon they were all strung together on one rope so there wasn't much freedom of movement.

The dragons were even trickier. As soon as the men approached them with ropes, they growled and flared out. Most of them were even ready to breathe fire, but all of the riders commanded that they stop. Then for extra precaution, they used whatever rope they had to tie the dragons together as they did the vikings.

A bit more satisfied, Fionnlagh finally led the way.

It was noon the next day before they reached any sign of settlement or civilization. Everyone was tired and their feet hurt tremendously, but once their destination came into view, both Merida and Hiccup knew exactly where they were.

Upon clearing the trees, they saw the MacGuffin village. It was exactly how Hiccup remembered it, except there was no snow covering the ground and there were many encampments surrounding the area, housing refugees that had escaped the terrors in DunBroch.

Merida recognized many of the people and ran to embrace them. Meanwhile the bound vikings were led through the town with the Princess till they came upon Lord MacGuffin's home. It took them a while to get there, for the news of the Princess' return spread like a wildfire and the crowd surrounding them only got bigger and bigger.

Though when the doors opened to the MacGuffin household, Merida's heart melted as she came face to face with one of the few people she wanted to see the most.

Queen Elinor came racing out with tears of joy and nearly fell to her knees as her own daughter wrapped her arms around her tightly. The crowd couldn't help but cheer as they saw the warm reunion. Even Hiccup smiled in relief despite his hands burning from the rope.

After a few minutes of gently rocking her daughter, Elinor let go and looked at her daughter.

"Merida, what are ye doing here? Ah was going ta send word for yer return. And what are ye wearing lassie?"

Wiping her face she gave her mother a half-smile. "Mum, th' ship was attacked by pirates. Ah was saved an' given hospitality by these people." she said, gesturing over to the vikings who had nearly drowned in the crowd. "They came with me ta help with th' dragons."

"Well, why are they tied up?" asked Elinor, ready to thank her daughter's rescuers. But Fionnlagh stepped in front of her.

"Because they are vikings, yer Majesty." he said.

At those words, the crowd gasped and stepped away from them.

"But not just any vikings." Merida said, raising her voice. "Four years ago, a boy washed up on th' shores of DunBroch. Mah family took him in an' he lived with us fer a time. Now he has returned with an offer ta help us, an' would ye deny any such help from a friend based upon his heritage? Hiccup gained mah trust four years ago, an' ah still hold it today."

Many people in the crowd murmured, trying to come to a conclusion on the vikings, but the only one to truly react was the Queen.

"Hiccup?" she said, stepping forward.

The Chief tried to raise his hand, indicating his presence, but he rope held him down. She approached him, studying his face. Respectfully, he gave a small bow.

"I'm sorry if this comes as a shock, Your Majesty." he said, "But yes, I am a viking and I'm sorry for hiding it from you and your people until now. Iâ€¦I don't know what happened between your people and vikings, but I assure you we are not all the same."

Elinor eyed him carefully, tracing his features. Suddenly her curiosity turned to her usual regal coldness. She stood up straight and her eyes narrowed.

"What was th' name of th' royal blacksmith?" she said sternly.

"Wha-â€¦Your Majesty-" said Hiccup.

"Answer th' question!"

"Bu- well it wasâ€¦hang onâ€¦it was Alex right? No! No, no, no it was Aliean!"

"A couple miles from here is a lake. You an' which families went there and what did they do?"

"Uh, well it was your family and the MacGuffins. We went out to go ice fishing."

"An' -"

"But then the ice started to crack and Merida almost fell in. I went out for her and we all managed to save her in time." he interrupted.

At that statement, Elinor gave a soft smile and a bit of a sigh. Then she curtsied to him.

"Welcome, _Chief_ Hiccup."

He bowed back, smiling.

"So uh, are they gonna take these ropes off or what?" said Snotlout, interrupting the moment. All of the vikings rolled their eyes, but Merida gave a soft giggle.

Elinor nodded to one of the men near her and he proceeded to cut their bands. They began to follow the Queen and Princess into the large house, but they were stopped when one of the men inquired about the dragons.

"Should we lock these up, Yer Majesty?"

She looked to Hiccup who gave her a pair of pleading eyes.

"I promise they will do no harm." he said.

Many of the men gritted their teeth, but the Princess nodded her head

at her mother, confirming Hiccup's statement.

"Let them go." she said quietly. There was an obvious amount of distain in her voice and the grumbling of the men, but soon the dragons were released like their riders.

* * *

><p>*Gaelic Name meaning 'Spear'
**Gaelic Name meaning 'white hero'
>***Gaelic Name meaning 'fox'
Â°Gaelic name meaning 'Champion choice'

26. Chapter 26

Inside the MacGuffin Home

Upon entering the MacGuffin house, they were all greeted by Lady MacGuffin and her daughter, Sorchu. They both had the same reaction Elinor did to realizing who Hiccup was, and for a while stood dumbfound at the man before them. There was also another woman there whom Merida introduced as Dona*. She looked a little older than Merida, but she had a broader build with brown eyes and dark hair. Unfortunately Cathal and the other men of the house were out hunting for food.

"It's been harder ta find food lately." said Lady MacGuffin. "Th' invaders took all of th' livestock an' crops in DunBroch, an' the dragons ate up everythin' in th' wild."

"Speaking of which," started Hiccup, "What happened?"

Lady MacGuffin, Sorchu and Dona looked at Elinor, who then proceeded to a secure room. Everyone followed her as she sat down in a soft chair.

"It all happened so suddenly." she said, rubbing her forehead. "It was in th' middle of th' night. Everyone was already asleep. I was woken up by one of th' guards, to be honest I couldn't even tell who it was I was so tired. But he told us there was someone who demanded a meetin' with us." She took a deep breath before continuing. "So Fergus an' I got dressed an' went ta th' throne room. There was a man there, watin' fer us. He had horrible scars stretchin' all over his face, an' his voice was so low I could barely hear him."

"What did he say?" said Hiccup quietly.

"He said...there was a danger comin'. An' we were fragile an' weak and that he would help us. But only if we bowed ta him as th' new King. Of course, ah didn't believe him. Fergus didn't either. So we refused."

She pressed her hands to her temples and rocked back and forth.

"Then they came. At first we didn't believe it, but beasts of all kinds started attacking from every direction. That's when I got you an' yer brothers." She looked to Merida. "I knew at that point that whatever was happening, it was because of that man. We were being

invaded, an' if he truly wanted th' throne, he'd need ta get all of us."

"Did he ever give his name?" Hiccup said.

"Aye, it was--"

"Drago Bludvist." Stoick spoke this time.

"Yes...how did ye know?"

Stoick's eyebrows furrowed. "Because the same exact thing happened years ago during a meeting with all the chiefs. He came with a proposal to stop the dragons, but once we refused all of the dragons attacked. I was the only one to make it out alive."

"Wait. How long ago was this?" Hiccup put in.

"You were still young. But this man is not to be trifled with. All he wants is war."

"I'm afraid th' war has already started." said the Queen.

A thought suddenly came to Merida's mind.

"Where's dad?" she said.

Elinor didn't look up and Sorchia shifted uncomfortably. Yet no one said a word.

"Mum! Where's dad?" But Elinor began to shake silently.

"Merida." said Lady MacGuffin. Merida turned her head quickly. "Yer father died."

There was an ominous silence in the room. Everyone just stood there, stunned.

Soon Merida was shaking as well. "W-what?"

"He was killed by one of th' dragons. Ah'm sorry, lass." The Lord's wife reached over and put her hand on Merida's shoulder. But the princess jerked away violently.

"No! Don't touch me! Don't ever touch me! Don't even talk ta me!" and with that she ran past everyone out of the room.

****Plan****

It was strange walking through the halls of the MacGuffin home. It had seemed like nothing had changed in the past four years. Everything was the same. Same decorations, same hard stone, same everything. Well, except the eerie silence. Closing his eyes, Hiccup could almost hear the triplets running past them, the Queen or Merida yelling after them as Brian ran down the stairs yammering about something to his brother. He could almost feel the wintry cold chilling his bones and feet as he continued to walk. But as he opened his eyes, the warmth of summer returned as well as the disheartening reminder of reality.

Eventually he came to a large wooden door which he knocked on quietly. Hearing no response, he opened it to find Merida shriveled on the floor with Astrid sitting next to her. The viking girl looked up, but Merida kept her knees close to her face. Upon seeing Hiccup, Astrid got up and dusted herself off before she joined him in the hall.

"How is she?" he said.

"She hasn't said a word since we found her in the forest."

He nodded but gave one last glance at the redhead before closing the door.

"So what's the status downstairs?" Astrid continued.

"We wanted to start a meeting on what to do next, but we thought maybe Merida should be there."

"It's probably best to leave her alone for now. She's pretty shaken up."

"Well who can blame her?"

They paused for a moment, letting the air settle.

"So," Hiccup started, "how's Thuggory doing."

Astrid raised an eyebrow. "I don't know. You've probably seen him more recently than I have."

"Yeah...yeah just-"

"Hiccup, are you okay?"

"Yeah I'm fine, it's...I'll see you downstairs."

Hiccup rushed downstairs to avoid talking any more. Eventually the meeting did start without Merida and both Queen Elinor and Stoick recited about Drago.

"He obviously knows quite a bit about dragons if he can control so many." said Stoick in a husky voice.

"Not jus' dragons either," said Elinor, "he's got an army of men with traps."

"How many men on our side?"

"Not enough. We keep sendin' scoutin' parties like the one you encountered ta see if they'll pursue us."

"What if we send a letter back home?" said Hiccup. "We could use our dragons to free the other dragons."

Stoick paused for a moment. "Or just fight the other dragons."

"Dad-"

"Son, we can't save every dragon. You know that."

"I also know that most dragons carry the instinct to protect, not to kill."

"Have ye considered that Drago is th' one they wish ta protect?" said Queen Elinor sternly.

"Well, either way I think the main focus here is Drago." said Astrid. "But the problem is that his defenses are too high. Even if we managed to send a letter back home, how are we going to get an army over here without anyone noticing?"

"Besides," said Stoick, "they saw us already. For all we know they're preparing themselves now."

Hiccup gave a heavy sigh. "So...what do we do?"

No one spoke for a good long while. It seemed as though everyone knew the answer, but no one wanted to say it. The silence hung in the air so long that everyone could hear the conversations being held down the street.

"There's only one thing we can do." said Thuggory softly. "We all have to retreat. Go somewhere else."

Elinor gave a soft sob. She was ready to protest, to fight for her land where she fell in love, where she raised her children. But even she knew it would only result in death. Biting her lip, she proceeded to cry.

"No." said a voice behind them. No one had realized the figure standing in the doorway, or that the door had even opened. But Merida stood tall and proud despite her red eyes and tear-stained cheeks. She had changed into a dress similar to the one she used to wear all the time, but this one was a dark grey with a square-neck and was decorated in silver trim. In her hand she held a sword that had once belonged to her father, but was given to the MacGuffin family as a token of peace. It was given back to her as a reminder of the passed patriarch.

"Ah'm goin' ta kill that bastard." said Merida.

No one said anything for a while, some out of surprise or shock and the others were just impressed.

"Merida, there's no way." said Hiccup gloomily.

"You say th' fate of mah kingdom is ta let it fall into th' hands of a murderer. Well ah won't accept that. Ah can't accept that. So ah'm goin' ta change fate. Ah've done it before an' ah'll do it again."

"Darling, we have no provisions or plan of attack." Elinor said, sitting back in defeat.

"But we have an advantage. We know this land better than anyone. Ah grew up on this land, an' ah will defend it with all mah strength."

"But what of the strength of your people?" said Stoick. "Just looking outside, anyone can tell they're tired and weak. They couldn't last ten minutes in battle."

Suddenly Hiccup's eyes lit up. "They don't need to fight."

Everyone looked to him as though he would suggest running again. But their looks turned to confusion as he rose from his seat in deep thought.

"Even though they know we're here, they don't know what we're going to do. We could sneak in the castle, find Drago and hold him captive against his own army." he said excitedly.

"Yeah, and how are we supposed to get in?" Snotlout huffed, crossing his arms.

The chief gestured toward Merida. "She just said they know the lands better than anyone. She also knows the castle as well. Do you know of any passages where we could enter unnoticed?" He turned to the princess.

"Aye." said Elinor. "Ah know of one."

"But you forget," started Tuffnut, "there's a whole bunch of dragons and stuff ready to burn our faces off."

"And who knows more about dragons than the founders of the Dragon Academy?" Hiccup looked around the table for any more objections. He knew it was tricky, but the look of gratitude on the Queen's face gave him reassurance.

No one spoke up. No one objected. It sounded a lot better than running away with their tails tucked between their legs, and the vikings were beginning to get eager for a fight.

"Ah only find one problem." said Merida. Everyone turned to look at her, and she stabbed the sword she was grasping into the table they sat around. "When we find Drago, we aren't goin' ta hold him hostage. Ah will kill him."

****Old Friend****

No one tried to argue with Merida. Anyone could see the bloodlust and determination in her eyes. But once they had finished the plan, Hiccup needed to go outside. His loyal Night Fury followed him, brushing against his hand as he walked.

"What am I going to do, bud?" he said as they crossed through the mass of refugees. "I've given up trying to argue with her, but she can't just-" he cut himself off as he kicked up his prosthetic.

They continued on their walk, thought Toothless was itching to fly. He would jump in front of Hiccup and flap his wings or even force him in the saddle.

"No, we can't fly today." Hiccup said, rubbing his friend's neck. "Sorry bud, but we can't risk being seen by the all the bad men."

"Aww, not even fer a little while?" said a voice. Hiccup turned quickly. He didn't recognize the voice at first, but as soon as he saw the owner his eyes widened.

"Cathal?" Hiccup slid off Toothless in an ungraceful manner.

The Eldest MacGuffin boy approached him, covered in mud and carrying a string of rabbits behind him. Like Hiccup, he too had grown over the years despite being quite large already. He had also grown a mustache that had begun to cover his lips.

Cathal nodded to his question. "Been a long time, Hiccup."

"Four years, but who's counting?"

"Ah'll admit, ah didn't recognize ye at first. Ah had ta ask around first."

Hiccup rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeahâ€¦time changes you. You're proof of that."

Cathal laughed and slapped the back of Hiccup's back, leaving a hint of mud. "So this must beâ€¦Footless?" He said, gesturing toward the black dragon.

Hiccup chuckled. "No, I'm Footless. This is Toothless."

"Toothless, right."

The Night Fury looked at Cathal with curiosity, but his eyes were slightly narrowed out of hesitation. Hiccup went over to Cathal and made him put up his arm. Toothless began to sniff his hand and was about to press his nose to it, but suddenly he got distracted by the dead kill behind Cathal's back. Excitedly, he tried to grab the string of brown rabbits.

"Hey! That's not for you!" Hiccup cried, and he pushed the dragon head away. But Toothless widened his eyes and tried to give the best pouty face he could.

"Heh, it's alright if he has one." The Scott cut one off the end and threw it to the dragon.

Toothless accepted it graciously and tore the rabbit to bits. He wasn't quite used to such a meal, but he seemed alright with it. After he was finished he approached Cathal, expecting more.

"No, that's it for you." Hiccup groaned, and he tried to get between the dragon and the Scott.

The dragon huffed, but he still tried to get close to Cathal.

"Well, I suppose that's one way to get a dragon's affection." Hiccup chuckled as he fought off the Night Fury. Eventually Toothless gave up trying to get another rabbit and wandered off back towards the house.

"He'sâ€¦not what ah expected." said Cathal as they watched the dragon waddle away.

"Yeah, he's full of surprises."

"Well, apparently so are you. Ah wasn't really expectin' ta see ye here."

"If it wasn't for Merida, I wouldn't be here."

"Speakin' of which, how is she? Ah haven't seen her since before th' attack."

Hiccup's bright expression faded. Physically, she was perfectly fine. But with everything that's happenedâ€¦

"Sheâ€¦she's dealing with a lot." Hiccup finally said.

Cathal nodded slowly. "Does she know about th' King?"

Hiccup didn't say anything. He simply gave a small nod and let the silence talk for itself.

"Were you there when heâ€¦" Hiccup choked.

Cathal shook his head. "Ah was here. No one knew till th' day after."

They stood in silence for a while as the world moved around them. Suddenly a little girl and boy casually walked up to the pair of them standing in the sun. The girl crept her way over to Hiccup and stared at him with large, brown eyes. Noticing her, he returned her look with a smile.

Gasping she ran and hid behind the little boy, who appeared to be her older brother.

"Aren't ye goin' ta ask him?" the boy said. He tried pulling his sister toward the viking again, but she held a firm grasp to his kilt.

Hiccup took a few steps toward them. "Ask me what?"

Upon hearing his voice, the girl tried to hide herself again and buried her face in her brother's shirt. Giving up, her brother spoke for her.

"She wanted ta see yer dragon." he sighed.

Hiccup gave a hearty chuckle. Then his eyes lit up.

"Give me a second." Then he ran back inside the house, leaving Cathal and the children outside.

Soon he came back out with a proceeding of dragons of all sizes and shapes along with their riders. As soon as she saw them, the girl's eyes widened as big as dinner plates and she froze in shock of them.

Each of the riders wished to show the pair that their dragon was best and displayed a great amount of tricks dealing with flight and fire. At first, many of the townspeople were afraid the dragons were attacking, but soon they saw the two children laughing and even

running around the dragons to play.

Toothless was especially eager to play. Since Hiccup had been less playful earlier, he went right up to the pair of children to gain affection. At first they were intimidated by this pitch black dragon, but as he rubbed against them and licked their faces and clothes, they became as playful as the dragon.

Soon there was a mass of children and adults going up to the dragons and looking upon them with wonder or even touching and playing with them.

Occasionally there would be a concerned individual who would drag their children and family members away from the dangerous beasts, but soon most of the people were joining in the dragon-human interaction.

****No Sleep****

All the members of the viking group had decided to sleep with their dragons, though some were presented with their own rooms. In the dining room, Snotlout and the twins curled up in a corner with Hookfang, Barf and Belch. Because of the positive interaction between the dragons and Scotts earlier that day, many of the refugees had agreed to sleep in the same room as dragons, so people and blankets were littered all around the floor.

Stoick had been given a private room with Skullcrusher which was rather small, but he was used to such dimensions. Thuggory shared a room with Fishlegs, though he never realized how much Fishlegs and Meatlug snored, so he soon found himself roaming the house. After a while he found himself at Astrid and Stormfly's room.

Knocking quietly, he whispered, "Astrid? You asleep?"

After a while of no reply, he turned to leave. Just then the door opened.

"No." said Astrid, still fully-dressed and not a hint of sleep in her eyes. "What are you doing up?"

"Couldn't sleep. My roommates aren't exactly the most quiet."

She gave a small chuckle. "I warned you when you volunteered to room with them."

He gave a half smile. "Yeah, I guess I should've listened."

"Well, you need someone to talk to for a while?"

"I don't know. Honestly, I'm really just wandering around."

"Well, I'm kind of bored. So I guess I'll join you." Astrid opened the door all the way, revealing the sleeping Nadder behind her. Stepping out, she proceeded down the hall in the direction she supposed Thuggory was going.

They walked quietly so as not to wake anyone, but it was so dark in the halls, they occasionally bumped into various objects. Eventually they found themselves outside where they could see everything in the

pale moonlight.

"So," said Astrid once they felt it was alright to speak at a normal volume, "what's been going on in the Meathead Tribe?"

Thuggory kicked a small pebble. "Same as always. Though a small dragon incident made us start planting season late."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, a couple of Whispering Deaths tore up our plantations and was moving toward the village."

"Oh yeah, you mentioned that in one of your letters. Didn't you try using someone as live bait?"

He gave a small chuckle. "Yeah. It was dad's idea. Luckily they didn't go for it, though. Otherwise he would've been ripped to shreds."

"Too bad we couldn't have come to help."

"Well, you were handling a situation on Changewing Island already. Couldn't drag you away from that."

Astrid rolled her eyes. "Rightâ€|that was annoying."

"By annoying, do you mean the dragons or the twins?"

"Both."

They shared a good laugh as they continued on into the plains of MacGuffin. Eventually they came upon a large lake. The night's darkness made the water look black, but the moon sparkled on its small ripples and reflected into their eyes. They found a lonesome tree by the water's edge and sat under its leaves. The warm summer breeze flew past them and licked their cheeks as they continued their conversation.

"So did Hiccup agree to perform the ceremony?" Thuggory asked.

"I haven't been able to get him to talk about it. He's always avoiding the subject whenever I try to ask." Astrid pulled her knees up to her chest.

Thuggory gave a small sigh. "To be honest, I'm not surprised."

"Why is that?"

"I'm pretty sure he still has feelings for you. The way he looks at you, it's pretty obvious." Putting his back to the tree, the chief's son looked over the water.

"Yeahâ€|I know."

"Do you still like him?"

Astrid said nothing. Resting her chin on her knees, she stared into nothingness.

Giving small nods, Thuggory continued. "Yeah, you do. And I'm okay with that."

She looked over to him. "You are?"

"Well, the two of you were a couple for a long time. And besides, as much as I'd like it if you only liked me, you wouldn't be the woman you are now if the two of you hadn't been together."

"Andâ€¦what if I decided to call it off and marry Hiccup instead?"

He raised his eyebrows. This wasn't exactly a situation he wanted to think about, but there was no escaping it. Exhaling, he shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I'd just have to get over it."

She nodded then looked back at the lake. There were a few moments of silence before she spoke again.

"You can relax; I'm still going to marry you."

He chuckled, only realizing then how much he had tensed up over the subject. Astrid leaned back and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Well, the way you said it, it seemed like you were going to."

She gave an evil smirk and raised her hand to flick his forehead.

"Ow!" he exclaimed, but Astrid took her chance and got up to run. Chasing after her, they ran all the way around the lake till she pushed him in. Though he was only in the shallows, his clothes were drenched. She laughed hard at him, her blonde hair flipping around her face.

But Thuggory wasn't defeated easily. Scooping up a large amount of water, he splashed her with a giant wave. Screamin, she tried to run away, but he grabbed her hand and pulled her into the water with him.

The water was cold compared to the warm summer air, but they continued to splash and dunk each other anyway. Finally, they climbed out, laughing. As they walked back to the MacGuffin mansion, Thuggory put a gentle hand on her shoulder and kissed her temple.

****Fergus, the Bear King****

Astrid and Thuggory weren't the only ones still awake. Merida sat by a small fireplace in her room, simply watching the flames as she held onto her father's sword. She didn't cry. She was tired of crying. All she felt now was a burning hate boiling up inside her as she awaited her chance of revenge.

Unfortunately, their plan wouldn't be set in motion till the next morning. They had worked out the details after she declared her requirement of killing Drago. Now all she had to do was wait for the sun to rise.

Her eyes were heavy and she had dark circles, but she didn't want to

sleep. She had already fallen asleep once, and when she awoke she was faced with a world without her father to guide her.

Closing her eyes, she tucked her feet under her nightgown. Through the darkness behind her eyelids, she saw her father's face. She saw him as clear as day with his bold face and bright eyes. His red hair she inherited was beginning to grey near the top, and wrinkles were forming all around his face. Whenever she teased him about being old, he always gave her a small grimace which turned into a smile.

She began to hold the sword tighter. Though she loved her mother with all her heart, she couldn't help but feel that her father was the one she connected to the most. He taught her to fight, to shoot, and even to dance. She remembered being a little girl as he spun her around the room. Sometimes she would stand on his feet as he moved them to a quick beat. Even when he lost his leg, he would dance with her and lift her in the air as high as she could go.

She missed him. She missed smelling the fresh grass smell after he returned from a hunt. She missed sparring with him in the courtyard. She missed teasing him with her brothers and she missed how he bickered with the Lords.

But what tore her up the most was the fact that she wasn't there. She couldn't be with him in the end. She couldn't see how he died. She couldn't even remember the last words she said to him.

"Don't worry dadâ€¦" she whispered, "Ah'll avenge youâ€¦Ah'll kill him fer youâ€¦"

****The Dragon Trapper****

A lone trapper ran through DunBroch's halls, not caring if anyone was asleep. Panting, he sped up a great amount of stairs till he reached the top of a tower. He prayed to the gods this was the right tower, as he had gotten lost before. Opening a hatch, he found a few guards sleeping.

"Wake up!" he said, kicking one of them. "Drago's getting furious, has anyone heard about the riders?"

One of them moaned sleepily while the other shot to his feet and stood at attention.

"Eret! No, we haven't seen anything, and the other guards haven't returned."

Eret shoved past him and looked over the tower. "And how could you tell they haven't returned if you're sleeping?"

The guard looked sheepish and tried to sink away. "Sorry, it won't happen again."

"It had better not." Turning to leave, he kicked the other guard who opened his eyes for a bit, then went back to sleep. Rolling his eyes, Eret grabbed the guard by the collar and pulled him to his feet. Unfortunately, all it did was make him sleep standing up.

Eret went back down the tower, only to be stopped by a looming figure. Eret recognized who it was right away, and his eyes widened

in fear.

"Where are they?" it said.

"Oh, Drago! Uh, well we haven't located the riders yet, but I assure you, I will personally trap their dragons and capture all of them."

Drago Bludvist said nothing. His dark eyes narrowed, and his mouth began to slowly form a grimace. Eret wanted nothing but to run, but his feet refused to move. Suddenly, a fist came in contact with his cheek.

The dragon trapper was send hurling backwards, clutching his throbbing cheek. He tried his best not to cry out, but the pain made him wince.

"Next time you fail me, I won't be so merciful!"

27. Chapter 27

****Early Morning Sendoff****

Hiccup woke to a Night Fury in his face, leading him to falling out of bed. Normally, he'd be used to seeing Toothless in the morning, but the dragon's face was so close, it was impossible not to feel his steady breathing.

"Thanks for that!" he said sarcastically while the reptile bounded around the room.

Standing up, Hiccup brushed himself off before putting his flight suit on. It was especially hard getting dressed since Toothless continuously rubbed against him and begged for food.

"Not now, you spoiled baby." said Hiccup, nudging the dragon to the side when he tried to open the door.

When he finally made it downstairs, everyone was already waiting for him.

"Hiccup!" said Astrid, "We were just going over the plan again."

In everyone's hands were a bowl of soup and a small piece of bread. Elinor and Lady MacGuffin were handing out food to everyone with the servants so everyone waking up could eat. After getting a bowl himself, Hiccup sat down.

"Is still don't see why I can't go along." mumbled Snotlout after taking a large bite out of his bread.

"You, Fishlegs and I have to stay here in case they attack us here." Stoick said darkly.

"Okay then, just to recap: Merida and I will be the ones going in." said Astrid. "Drago will most likely be inside, but I don't know my way around the place, so I guess I'll just follow you, Merida."

The princess said nothing. She hadn't even eaten any of her food. Her

soup was getting cold and her bread soggy. Hiccup attempted to put a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged him away.

"Anywayâ€¦" continued Astrid, "There will be a lot of guards, and that's where Hiccup and Thuggory come in."

"And Toothless and Killer." Thuggory added in.

"Right. Well, we're going to need a big distraction in order to avoid all those guards."

"Don't worry, we got it covered." said Hiccup as he ate.

"How long do you want us to fly around?" said Thuggory.

Astrid sighed. "Hopefully not too long. But we'll need to get in, find Drago and wellâ€¦finish it all."

"Do you think we ought to bring Stormfly, in case we'll need to escape?"

Astrid shook her head. "No, we'll have Toothless, Killer and Barf and Belch. We should try to avoid bringing as many dragons as we can."

Hearing her name, Stormfly went over to Astrid and nudged her arm.

"Oh, don't think I don't want to bring you." Astrid said soothingly. Gently, she stroked the Nadder's quills before sending her back to be with the other dragons.

"Wowâ€¦it sounds simple when you say it out loud." said Tuffnut.

"Well, when you take into account that they have to find a secret entrance, avoid all the guards and find Drago without getting caught," said Thuggory, "Plus Hiccup and I have to avoid all the traps they throw at us and they might send other dragons at us, there's plenty complications in this."

"Ohâ€¦I like how Astrid said it betterâ€¦"

"According to Lady MacGuffin, lots of people fled to the other clans. Right now, they're in the same state we're in." said Hiccup. "Apparently they sent a letter to one of them about a week ago requesting help on food. They should be here anytime now."

"Which one?"

"Dingwall."

"What wall?"

From that moment on, they passed along jokes and laughs, brightening the spirit. Though, when Hiccup looked over, he could see Merida's depressed expression. She didn't participate in the conversation in any way, and whenever someone chuckled or laughed she looked uncomfortable.

After a while of seeing this, Hiccup leaned over to her.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" he whispered.

She gave a small nod and set her bowl down. After they were out of earshot from the rest of the group, Hiccup began speaking.

"You okay?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Why wouldn't ah be?"

"Alright, wrong question. I know you're not alright. Do you need to talk?"

Merida shifted on her feet and avoided all eye contact with him as he spoke. Eventually she just shook her head.

"Are you sure? Because you seem like-"

"Like what? Like I'm depressed? I'm distant?"

"Like you're not yourself anymore."

She narrowed her eyes. "Mah father is dead, Hiccup. Th' man who is responsible is still alive. Ah will not be myself until this sword is in his heart."

"Merida, I'm not sure killing him is the best plan. He's already knows a lot about dragons, maybe we can change his mind and convince him that they're not completely vicious creatures."

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III you look me in th' eye an' you tell me if Drago killed yer father you wouldn't do th' same thing."

"Meridaâ€¦you still-"

"They didn't even give him a proper burial!"

Hiccup took a step back. "What?"

"Ah heard from Cathal. They put his body up fer display on th' highest tower like he's some sort of prize!"

The entire room went silent. Now everyone's attention was on the steaming redhead. Hiccup tried to say something, but all he could do was open his mouth.

"Yer right, ah'm not myself anymore. An' because of that man ah never will be. But that doesn't mean ah can't bring him justice."

Without another word she left.

****Ready, Set, Go****

"Ruff, Tuff, do you know your positions?"

"Yeah, of course we do!...Wait, hold on, no. What are we doing?"

Hiccup slapped himself in the face for the seventh time that day. They had all departed not long after eating breakfast, and despite leaving early in the morning, they reached the edge of the burned forest by DunBroch Castle close to dusk. As it got darker, they prepared themselves for action.

"You two are the lookout." said Astrid, rolling her eyes. "If we get captured or the plan goes wrong, you two go back and tell the others."

"So we sit here and do nothing?" Ruffnut groaned.

"Wrong. You sit there an' watch." Merida said. Looking at the castle wall, she readied her bow. Her father's sword was strapped to her hip, and her hood was up to hide as much of her face and hair as possible.

There were a great deal of guards, much more than they had hoped. All around, they patrolled and marched, keeping as sharp eye as best they could. They also noticed a large amount of dragon traps around the wall.

"Okay, it looks like they're prepared for just about anything. Merida, Astrid, you should get to your position." Hiccup whispered.

Merida eyed the wall again. She seemed confident that she and Astrid wouldn't be seen, but her bubbling anger was beginning to cloud her judgment and perception.

Astrid nudged her arm. "C'mon, let's go."

Before they could get too far away Hiccup called Merida's name and she turned to face him.

"â€|Good luckâ€|" he said.

The princess nodded and they made their way. Since many of the trees had been burned away, it was a longer walk than they had anticipated. Keeping to the shadows as much as possible, they made their way under the stone bridge leading to the castle. There, waiting for them was an entrance that had been long forgotten over the years. Merida and Elinor had used it only once prior during the bear incident. Carefully, the pair of them made their way inside.

"They're in." whispered Thuggory. He turned to Hiccup. "You ready?"

Hiccup nodded and looked over to Toothless. They had brought the Night Fury as well as Killer along as part of the plan. The riders mounted their dragons and waited. After a few minutes, they shot upward and cleared the trees. As an extra effect, Toothless shot a plasma blast into the night sky.

All at once, they caught the attention of every guard and trapper in the area. Unfortunately, they couldn't see the Night Fury and Monstrous Nightmare too well in the darkened sky. One moment there was peace and quiet; the next there was screaming and yelling all throughout the castle.

Merida and Astrid could hear all the commotion above their heads, and the further they went in the corridor, the louder the noises became. Eventually, they came to a large, circular hole in the ceiling with a rope hanging in the middle of it. Grabbing hold of it, Merida began her ascent with Astrid following. It wasn't too long of a climb, but their arms were still beginning to tire, especially since they had to try to be as quiet as possible.

Once they reached the top, Merida poked her head out of the opening. They had come up out of a well in the courtyard. Since it was dried up, no one used it anymore, but they never removed it either. Looking around, she could see everyone focusing on the two dragons and their riders in the air. Straining her neck, she looked even farther to see they had a clear shot to the door.

She gestured to Astrid, and then climbed out of the well as quickly as possible. Because of all the commotion, none of the guards in the towers took any notice to them and they silently opened the door to the throne room.

Unfortunately, not everyone had gone outside, and they were instantly spotted in the firelight. With their axe and sword, the two of them fought off anyone who pursued them as they made their way through the room. Blood was spilled everywhere as the princess showed no mercy. Soon there wasn't a single conscious soul in the room.

Merida nodded to Astrid and they made their way up the stairs. They came upon more guards, but this time Astrid wouldn't let the princess kill him. As he pulled a sword, the viking girl swung her axe and disarmed him. Next thing he knew he was up against a wall with a thick blade at his throat.

"Where's Drago Bludvist?" Astrid said darkly.

The man's eyes filled with fear, and he sputtered only two words: "N-not here."

It was Merida's turn to widen her eyes.

"What do ye mean, 'not here'?" she said.

"Precisely that." said another voice behind them.

The princess turned just to find a blade coming at her. She parried it with her father's sword just in time, but she fell backward. If it weren't for Astrid, the other man would have skewered her.

After Astrid blocked his second attack, the man took a step backward and observed his opponents.

"Now who are you?" he said.

"Might we ask the same question?" said Astrid as she pulled Merida to her feet.

The man bowed as though he expected no attack. "Eret, son of Eret; the best trapper in the Archipelago, and at the moment, the one in charge here."

Merida took a step forward. "I am Merida DunBroch. Heir to the throne

of this kingdom and the one who is goin' ta kill Drago."

Eret frowned. "Well that's gonna be hard to do since he's not here." he raised his sword to attack again, but Astrid raised a hand.

"Wait!" she said. "If he's not here, then where is he?"

Eret ignored her and swung anyway. Merida stepped in front of Astrid and blocked him.

"Our scouts found the dragons riders this morning. He left to take care of them not long after."

Both Astrid and Merida froze. Immediately they looked at each other with terrified looks. Only two second after, Merida sprinted for the closest stairs and ran upward. Astrid turned to Eret and swung a leg at him, kicking him in the gut. In a hurry, she hit the back of his head with the butt of her axe and ran after the princess.

There were no more guards along the way, but once they reached the top of a tower, they found a mass of trappers working their machines to catch Toothless and Killer. At first, they didn't notice the two girls emerge on from the door, so Merida and Astrid had the advantage of surprise over them. Soon all the guards were either dead or knocked out.

Standing on the edge of the tower, Merida tried calling the riders, but her voice was drowned out by the shouts from all the other towers.

Working as fast as she could, Merida tore a piece off her dress and tied it to the end of an arrow. Using one of the torches on the tower, she lit it on fire and took aim.

Hiccup and Toothless were getting tired of simply dodging traps and decided to take care of a few. They came in for a dive in the dark night, and blew one of the towers. Killer and Thuggory were burning some of the guards in the courtyard, but apparently the twins got bored and they had joined in the fight.

The Night Fury rose high into the clouds, ready to dive again. But as they climbed higher, something flaming flew a little too close to Hiccup's face. Turning his attention, Hiccup saw Merida and Astrid yelling and waving on a tower. They dove straight for them and hovered just above their heads.

"Hiccup! He's not here!" Merida yelled. "He's headed toward MacGuffin territory! We have to go back!"

The chief lifted his helmet, revealing a shocked face. "Drago's at the MacGuffin's? Why?"

"He must've found out where we were, but there's no time, we have to leave!" Astrid called.

In a flash, Hiccup left and told Thuggory and the twins the news. In just a few more seconds, Astrid leapt off the tower and caught one of the Monstrous Nightmare's claws. Next, the Night Fury landed on the tower so Merida could climb aboard. They headed straight North,

hoping to reach everyone in time. Suddenly, the princess had a thought. Turning her head, she looked for the tallest tower. She leaned back as far as she could to see, but they flew past too quickly.

"I know what you're looking for." said Hiccup.

"Ah can't just leave him there." she cried.

"And you won't have to."

Snapping forward, she looked at the viking. "What do ye mean?"

He turned his head so she could hear him better. "I cut him downâ€|while the two of you were inside." he looked back ahead of them. "I saw him and I knew it would kill you to see him that way. Got hit by a stray arrow, though." he patted his left leg, revealing a deep gash.

Merida hugged him tighter around the waist. "Where'd ye put him?"

"Toothless used his plasma blasts to dig a small grave. He's just beyond the tree line. It didn't take too long, actually."

Biting her lip, she pressed her forehead to his back.

"Thank youâ€|" she said, quietly.

He placed a hand over her arm reassuringly. As they flew, he rubbed it gently with his thumb while she sniffed softly.

But soon the MacGuffin land came into view over the horizon, and none of them were prepared for what they saw.

****Burn Down in Flames****

There were dragons everywhere. Some of them heavily armored, others flying with only their thick hide. All the tents were in flames and people were getting slaughtered left and right. Men, women and children were either running or fighting for their lives. Some ran for the MacGuffin mansion, others headed straight for the trees. Only a few appeared to stand a chance against the dragon army, and they were the dragon riders who flew fighting fire with fire.

Stoick the Vast and his loyal dragon Skull Crusher remained on the ground where they could charge the enemy. It appeared as though most of the men on Drago's side stayed behind in DunBroch and Drago took all the dragons to advance.

Not believing his eyes, Hiccup landed close to his father.

"Dad!" he cried as he ran to him. "Dad, what happened?"

"Hiccup! They came a few hours ago. These dragons just came out of nowhere and started attacking!"

"Well, what can we do?"

"We've been trying to keep up a fort at the MacGuffin house."

Just then, Merida came running up.

"Where's my mother?" she said.

Stoick shook his head. "She's inside the mansion."

Panicked, the princess ran off. "Mum!" she cried as she shot down dragons from the sky.

Hiccup was about to go after her when he spotted a figure coming towards them. A shadow walked slowly through the flames. As it emerged, it tore back a dragon skin cloak.

"Drago!" said Stoick through gritted teeth. He was about to charge the man when a dragon began to charge him.

Toothless automatically went around Hiccup protectively and bared his white teeth. Taking off his helmet, Hiccup went to meet him halfway. His hands shook and his leg was still in pain from the arrow wound, but he stood tall as he approached the dark man.

"Drago Bludvist?" he said, standing in front of him.

The scarred man raised an eyebrow. "Who are you?" he said in a dark voice.

"I am Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III, Chief of the Hairy Hooligan Tribe and the first to tame a dragon on Berk."

"Berk?" he said slowly. "I've heard of Berk, but I know it isn't anywhere around here."

"I am a friend to the people here. They asked my help and now I ask you to stop all this."

He gave a deep chuckle. "And what power do you have to stop all this?"

Hiccup took a deep breath. "Look around you. Dragons aren't meant for all this."

"And what do you know about dragons? You say you tame them, but they are ruthless creatures who do nothing but kill."

"No, they're not and I can prove it to you."

"Tell me, _Chief_ Hiccup; have you ever felt fear?"

Hiccup didn't respond. Instead he bit his lip.

"When I was a boy," Drago continued, "I feared the dragons as they destroyed my family, my village, and me." Moving his cloak aside, he revealed that his entire left arm was made of metal. To prove his point further, he removed the metal to display the stump where his arm used to be.

"It was then that I decided I would rid the world of this fear of dragons." he said, replacing the metal arm.

"This doesn't look like getting rid of fear, this looks like a massacre."

"They refused my offer. They chose their own consequences."

"These people had nothing! And yet you come down here and destroy them anyway!"

"Wrong." Drago lifted a finger and pointed straight at Hiccup. "They had you."

Hiccup's eyes widened. All at once, everything hit him. The only reason Drago had come was because of him. If they hadn't seen them riding dragons, Drago wouldn't have come.

"You shouldn't have let your little dragons play outside yesterday." Drago smirked. "Now, I will show you what a real dragon looks like."

Far to the East was the ocean. The MacGuffin fleet sat untouched, but right next to all the Scottish boats revealed how Drago and the attack party missed each other coming from opposite directions. Just then Drago gave a loud yell and a dragon came down to his side. As he grabbed its horn, it lifted him high in the air and took him to the water's edge. As soon as he got there, he let out a deafening cry.

Not long after, the water began to bubble slowly at first, then more rapidly till something burst out of the water. It was huge. Bigger than anything anyone had ever seen.

Once it had placed one of its massive paws on land, everyone stopped to look. By the time it had its second paw on the land, Drago returned to where Hiccup was.

"Behold, the Alpha species." said Drago.

Hiccup had only ever seen one dragon even close to its size. But this one had faded white skin and large tusks that could level a castle in one blow. As it made its way to the battle, it flared out its wings and gave a loud roar. Everyone, including Merida, gaped at the beast before them.

Then the Alpha showed its true power and blasted half the town. But instead of fire, ice shot from its mouth and froze the land in a giant iceberg.

"Whoever controls the Alpha," Drago continued, "controls every dragon." Suddenly he raised a finger at Toothless. "Even yours."

At that moment, there was a high ringing coming from the Alpha. The Night Fury bent over and closed his eyes.

"Toothless?" Hiccup said, approaching his dragon. But he couldn't hear him any longer. The dragon groaned in pain and slowly, but surely, lost all control. His eyes narrowed and his body went rigid. He couldn't see or hear anything anymore.

"Hiccup!" a voice called. Merida was running toward him, hoping he could explain the giant dragon.

"Merida, wait!" Hiccup had no idea what was going on. He had never seen Toothless act like this, and there's no telling what would happen.

But it just made things worse. Upon seeing Merida, Drago gave another yell and pointed toward her.

In a trance, Toothless slowly walked toward her and opened his mouth.

"Wait, no!" Hiccup cried, and he ran to stop the dragon, but with a single flick of a tail, Toothless pushed him aside and sent him skidding across the land.

"Toothless?" Merida said cautiously, and held out a hand for him. But he couldn't hear her. Instead he began to form a great amount of gas at the back of his throat, preparing for a shot.

"What's going on? Toothless! What are ye doing?" her voice began to quicken and she found herself backing away from the dragon.

Then he fired.

Merida felt herself being pushed aside just as she heard the familiar blast ring through the air.

For a moment, all her senses were gone. The first to come back was her hearing. She could hear Hiccup screaming as he ran. Next to come back was her vision. Coughing, she looked to where she used to be.

There, lying on the ground was Cathal MacGuffin.

Getting up, she ran to him. She nearly tripped over her skirt, but soon both she and Hiccup came to a halt next to him.

"Cathal!" Hiccup cried, and desperately he tried to shake him awake.

But he didn't move. In another attempt, he pressed an ear to his chest. He waited a few secondsâ€¦a minuteâ€¦two minutesâ€¦

â€¦Nothing.

He lifted his head slowly and looked into Cathal's face, his eyes wide in terror.

Merida had no idea what to do. Cathal had just saved her life, and now he's dead. She started to breathe rapidly and she grasped her hair out of confusion.

But the one who was confused the most was Toothless. Just after he released his plasma blast, the Alpha released his senses. Wide-eyed, he looked to his lamenting rider, and the figure on the ground.

He cocked his head, then approached Cathal's lifeless body and tried to lick his hand.

"No!" Hiccup said angrily, and he pushed Toothless' head away. "Don't touch him!"

The Night Fury took a few steps back, but he had no idea why he was being scolded. He put his ears down and lowered his head. Soon he would lose all feeling and senses again and the Alpha took control over his body again.

Without a thought, the Night Fury turned and left, as though his work was done. But not according to Drago.

To add salt to the wound, Drago mounted Hiccup's dragon and gave one final command. The Alpha took control of all the remaining dragons, even those who still had fighting riders on them and directed them toward the ships. But as each dragon turned to leave, they all shot a blast at the only place of refuge.

Within seconds the entire MacGuffin mansion was in flames. Reality struck Merida hard once she realized; her mother was in there.

"Mum!" she yelled, and she started to run to the house. "Mum, no!" she was just about to run into the flames themselves when she felt someone grab her around the waist.

Hiccup ran after her once he realized where she was headed. She kicked and punched hard for him to let her go, but he refused to release her.

Soon there was nothing but ash.

28. Chapter 28

****Enemy Advance****

Eret woke up the next morning with a rather large headache. Many of the men had to be treated because of the invaders the night before, and some of them they found dead.

"You let them escape?" He rubbed his head as he scolded some of the guards.

"They had a Night Fury." said one of the guards solemnly.

"I don't care. If Drago finds out, he'll have all our heads!"

Another guard raised his hand sheepishly.

Eret rolled his eyes. "What?"

"What if we don't tell Drago?"

"Then how would we explain all these casualties?" he gestured to the bodies lining the cold, stone floor.

Suddenly the large, oak doors burst open, and in stepped the man they all feared.

Eret tried to put on the best poker face he had and gave a goofy smile.

"Drago! You're back! Well, uhâ€¦see we can explain all this." he chuckled nervously.

But the dark dragon master ignored him. Instead, he pushed him to the side and began to make his way up the stairs.

Eret tripped over himself before chasing down the man.

"Listen, Drago. I know they got away, but hear me out. Since you had already gone out, we didn't expect anyone to-

"Sir!" another guard called out.

Drago turned slowly, already annoyed by Eret's continuous excuses.

"We have two prisoners." the guard continued. "They were found on one of the Zipplebacks."

Just then two young dragon riders were pushed in the doorway. Both were the same age and had long, blonde hair. Their hands were tied behind their backs, and despite their mouths being tied, they kept trying to speak and mumbled everything.

"Dragonriders?" Drago said softly.

"We assume so. Their dragon had saddles, and we found this."

The guard pulled out a small piece of cloth from his pocket. On it was a decorative dragon design whose tail curled inward.

"Berk."

****A Day of Blood and Tears****

More than three quarters of the people died that day. Through the entire morning, those who were left took to digging graves. Eventually, it got to the point where they dug one, big trench and dumped in whatever corpses hadn't been consumed by the flames or trapped in the giant iceberg from the Alpha's mouth.

Everywhere, there were cries and laments sung in Gaelic. Once the bodies were covered, each remaining Celt offered one last lullaby to their dead loved ones. As the lamenting continued, Hiccup and Merida sat as far away as they could from the graves. They helped work all day, but as soon as they got the chance, they removed themselves from the sickening sight.

Neither of them said anything. It seemed as though the air was pushing down on them and no one could say a word. Hiccup looked over to her, expecting to see a tear or the embodiment of anger, but this time she held no expression. Her cheeks were stained and dirty, but her eyes were dried up.

After a while, Merida opened her mouth and began to sing in Gaelic.

(Listen to song here)

"_Oh hush-a-bye, my little baby,_

Hush, my little baby, hush.

Oh hush-a-bye, my little baby,

My own little baby will go to sleep."

Her voice choked, but she kept going.

"_Though I am without a flock of sheep,_

And the others all have sheep,

Though I am without a flock of sheep,

You, little baby, can go to sleep.

Oh hush-a-bye, my little baby,

Hush, my little baby, hush.

Oh hush-a-bye, my little baby,

My own little baby will go to sleep.

Darling, of the people of the great world

They spilt your blood yesterday.

They put your head on an oaken post

A little way from your corpse.

Oh hush-a-bye, my little baby,

Hush, my little baby, hush.

Oh hush-a-bye, my little baby,

My own little baby will go to sleep.

I breathlessly climbed the great mountain,

I climbed and I descended.

I would put the hair of my head under your feet,

And the skin of my two hands.

Oh hush-a-bye, my little baby,

Hush, my little baby, hush.

Oh hush-a-bye, my little baby,

My own little baby will go to sleep." *

Her voice trailed off at the end, and she gulped hard as her throat swelled up. Upon hearing the song end, Hiccup wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close. Even when all the songs were sung, the two of them remained out beyond the dying fields and steaming ruins.

They watched as some came through the dying forest with flowers to pour over their loved ones' grave, others put weapons or other items that weren't burned on the softened earth.

Soon a strong wind came down from the mountains and blew some of the thick smoke away. After a while, neither Hiccup nor Merida could tell if they were shivering or trembling.

Eventually they got up and started walking. Hiccup still had an arrow wound in his leg which needed treatment, so they made their way to the other wounded.

Mostly everyone was injured in some way, so everyone had gathered by the lake to treat their wounds. Finding an open spot, Hiccup sat himself down by the bank as he removed his prosthetic. The arrow had cut through his left leg on the outside just above the knee. It had been open for a long time already, and there was plenty blood.

Taking the cleanest cloth he could find he washed his wound and bandaged himself off with scraps from a blanket.

Merida had sat next to him, but she didn't say or do anything. She had plenty of scrapes and cuts on her arms and face, but she didn't bother to treat them.

Hiccup washed off another piece of cloth and held it out to her, but once again, she remained completely still. Hiccup almost gave up, but instead he moved closer to her and began wiping away the dirt and tears from her cheeks. He also cleaned out the scrapes on her arms, but there wasn't much else they could do to treat them. No one had any stitches for deep cuts, and all of the bandages were used for the most serious injuries.

Once he finished, he looked around at everyone. His father was helping a young girl with brown eyes fix a dislocated shoulder. She was crying a lot and when he put it back in for her she screamed at the top of her lungs. It was the same girl who approached him the day before.

Scanning the area with his eyes, he could see Fishlegs and Snotlout crying over their dragons. But a little ways from where he and Merida were was Astrid. She too was crying, but her hands shook as she tried to clean someone's burns.

It was Thuggory. Most of his upper body was burned, including his entire right arm. The injury continued up half of his neck and his right cheek all the way to his forehead. He was unconscious, but alive. Every time Astrid brought a cool cloth to his burns, his breathing would quicken and he would sometimes moan.

Hiccup walked over to see if he could help, but Astrid was too distressed to answer.

"H-he heard th-them screamingâ€|" she said, trembling. Hiccup brought up his hands and steadied her arms.

"There were p-people inside, screamingâ€|h-he ran in to save them." Tears streamed from her eyes like waterfalls. "He c-came out with two people, b-both of them diedâ€|He was lit like a torch."

Underneath his back, separating him from the ground was a large plank of wood. It was wet, suggesting Astrid washed it off as much as possible before laying him on it.

Soon, dusk came upon them, and yet the lamenting did not cease. Some people slept by the graves of their loved ones, others took refuge under the trees. Hiccup stayed behind to help Astrid take care of Thuggory, and they managed to cool his skin enough to wrap certain burns in cold, wet cloths. But Merida decided to sit by the ocean.

She sat by the water's edge as the waves and ripples kissed her feet. She saw and heard nothing as the winds encircled her and the sea called her name.

That night she only slept when she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. At first, all she saw was darkness. There was nothing stretching all before her. Then she could see her father.

"Happy Birthday mah wee darling!" he shouted, and he picked her up and swung her around the room.

Looking around, she saw she was at home. She was in her bedroom and the sun pouring in from the window proved it was morning. Next thing she knew, her brothers ran in, one by one and jumped on her bed.

"Boys! Get down an' hug yer sister!" said a stern, yet motherly voice. Elinor walked in, wearing her most regal attire.

All three triplets put on sour faces and got off the bed. Then they put on the brightest smiles they had and pounced on their sister. Merida laughed with her back to the floor, but her large father picked them all up and set them right.

Then everything changed and Merida was lying on the grass outside. Elinor was sitting at a wooden table, eating as delicately as she could, and Fergus was trying to give the boys a sword lesson. Unfortunately, it only resulted in them all jumping on him and taking his weapons away. Getting up, Merida found her bow next to her, and she picked it up.

As soon as she touched it, all she saw was fire. The flames exploded from her hands and enveloped everyone. She tried to tell them to run and hide, but they paid no attention to her. Soon the flames consumed everything.

She woke up screaming and kicking. Reality hit her like a rock as she stared out beyond the waves, only to remember that even though she was awake, nothing was better.

****The Next Destination****

Ruffnut and Tuffnut sat in a dungeon across from one another; each one had a leg chained to the floor.

"Do you think if I screamed loud enough, the walls would fall and we could escape?" said Tuffnut.

"Do you think if I punched you hard enough, you could scream that loud?" Ruffnut rolled her eyes at her brother.

"Maybe. Just don't hit my toe. I stubbed it yesterday."

"What about your arm?"

"No, I need it for later."

"Need it for what?"

"Well I was planning to learn how to juggle Terrible Terrors."

"You can't juggle dragons."

"Why not?"

"Cause why juggle dragons when you could juggle chickens?"

"Oh, Odin's Beard will you two SHUT IT?" said Eret, coming down the stairs. "I already have a headache, I don't need you to make it worse."

As soon as Ruffnut saw the trapper come down the stairs, her eyes lit up.

"Hi!" she said salaciously.

Eret rolled his eyes. Ever since the two of them were dragged in the castle, Ruffnut had been acting very strangely toward Eret. When he took them to the dungeon she kept trying to get closer to him, and when he opened the door to shove them in their cell, she paid close attention to his biceps.

"Alright, enough of that; Drago wants you to take him to Berk."

"And why would we do that?" said Tuffnut after he tried to sick a rock in his mouth.

"He's willing to grant your freedom if you do."

"I'm free to go anywhere with you?" Ruffnut slowly crawled closer to the cell bars.

Eret took a step backwards. "Uh...no."

She crossed her arms. "Then no."

Eret put on a grimace. "But..." he gave a deep sigh. "Well, maybe."

"Too bad we don't even know the way." said Tuffnut.

"Wait, what?" Eret looked confused and furious as his eyebrows furrowed.

"Yeah, we mostly just followed Hiccup here."

Frustrated, Eret ran back up the stairs. Drago was not going to like this.

****Move On****

Even after she woke up, Merida didn't move from her spot. She just continued to look at nothing beyond the waves. She didn't think of anything while she looked, for everything she thought of reminded her of something she wished to forget.

After the morning pulled on, noises started to be heard from the forest. At first, no one wanted to see who it was, in fear that Drago had returned. Only a little while after, men on horseback emerged from the tree line, shocked at the crippled sight.

They were the members of the Dingwall Clan who had been sent for the week prior. They came bearing food, but food was all they had. There was only about fifteen of them, but every single one froze at what lay before them. A few ran to the graves and cried out their sorrows, but all the rest tended to the survivors.

One of the saviors rode up next to where Hiccup, Astrid and Thuggory were.

"What happened here?" he said.

"Drago cameâ€¦he did this." said Hiccup sorrowfully.

The man stood there for a moment, stunned at everything around him. Then he quickly looked back to Hiccup.

"Where's Cathal?" he said, a bit worried.

Hiccup looked away from him. Without saying anything, he continued to take care of Thuggory.

"Don't tell me he'sâ€¦" the man's voice trailed off.

Hiccup looked back to him, but still said nothing. Taking his silence as confirmation, the man nodded slowly as his eyes went distant.

"How'd you know him?" Astrid said softly.

The man got off his horse. "Cathal was mah brother-in-law."

Hiccup stood up. "Cathal was married?"

He nodded. "Aye. To mah sister. Butâ€¦how did you know him?"

"He was my friend." Hiccup said as tears welled up. "One of the few I had when I first came here."

"Which clan are ye from?"

"I'mâ€|not Scottishâ€|I'm a viking."

The man took a step back. He looked Hiccup up and down, studying him. But what he noticed most was the look of remorse glued on his face. Eventually, his expression softened.

"Wellâ€|if ye were a friend ta Cathal, yer a friend ta me." he held out a hand. "Name's Alan**."

Hiccup took his hand. "I'm Hiccup. This is Astrid and Thuggory." He gestured to the two still on the ground. Astrid gave a small nod, but then returned to her work.

Alan took another look around. After a full day, the wreckage had stopped smoking, but now the ice from the Alpha's mouth was beginning to melt and soften the ground.

"This is terrible." he said. "No one knew any of this was happenin'."

Hiccup gave a heavy sigh. "What's done is done. What we have to do now is figure out what to do now."

"What _are_ ye goin' ta do?"

Hiccup shrugged his shoulders. "I don't knowâ€|we lost, and there's no way to fight back."

"We need to get these people out of here." Astrid said, standing up. Brushing herself off, she looked to Alan. "Do you think you could take everyone back to your clan? It's best if we get them away from this nightmare, and I need someplace safe for Thuggory."

"Of course." said Alan. "We should probably get going as soon as possible then."

Hiccup looked to Astrid. "I'm gonna go get Merida."

Just then Alan froze. "Merida? As in _Princess_ Merida?"

"Yeah."

His eyes lit up light like lamps at midnight. "She's here? Where is she?"

Hiccup gestured for him to follow. He took him to where she'd been all night and day. For a moment, she seemed unrecognizable. Her face was frozen like a statue and her eyes lost all color. Even her hair drooped in sadness.

But once he saw her, Alan ran to her side.

"Princess! Yer here!" he exclaimed. But she didn't respond.

"Princess, we received word ye had left on a boat weeks ago, everyone thought ye were still out there!"

Once again, she said nothing. She didn't even look at him. A bit lost, Alan looked to Hiccup.

But Hiccup gave him yet another solemn look before gesturing him away from the grieving girl.

"Merida," Hiccup said after Alan joined his side, "We were going to take everyone to the Dingwall Clan. We'll be leaving shortly."

Knowing she wouldn't respond, Hiccup turned and left without another word.

True to his word, they gathered all the survivors and prepared to leave the desolation. Some rebelled and ran to the grave of their loved one, vowing to never leave their side; others were like Merida and didn't move. Only few agreed to leave with the company. They set the unconscious Thuggory on a cart next to a middle aged woman whose leg got caught in the wreckage of the fire.

Soon, after much convincing, there was only one person left. Hiccup was about to go tell her, but his father grabbed his shoulder.

"Let me talk to her for a second." he said. Hiccup nodded slowly and Stoick made his way to the ocean.

"We're about ready to go." said Stoick as he walked over to Merida. Her reaction was the same as always.

Silently, he sat down next to her.

"I'm sorry." He paused for a while, waiting to see her give a reaction. "What are you going to do now?" He looked to her.

"You're a good lass." he continued. "And it seems I misjudged you for a long time."

She still said nothing.

"To be completely honest with you, I hated Scotts for a long time. I never forgave them for what they did and I suppose it's alright if you never forgive what they did."

He reached out a hand and placed it on her shoulder.

"But you also need to move on so you can fight back. I admired your ambition earlier, and now you need it more than ever."

"What's the point?" she finally said. Her throat was dry, so only half her words were clear. "Ah could kill Drago, get mah revenge, but for what?"

Stoick raised an eyebrow. "A peace of mind; Your parents at rest."

"Aye, and then what? Ah have no one. Everyone ah've ever loved is dead an' there's nothin' ah can do about it!" Angrily she took a handful of grass and threw it at the ocean.

Stoick paused for a moment. "Everyone?"

Merida fell silent again.

"There's something I tell my son often." The old chief said huskily. "It's something my father told me for a long time. 'A chief protects his own.' As a leader, it is your duty to take care of your people. They need you right now, will you help them?"

Sighing and groaning, Stoick heaved himself up from his knees and turned to walk away once he received her silent response.

****In the Dungeon****

"Ugh, how much longer can they take?" said Ruffnut as she tried to take the shackles off her leg. "I think my leg's gone numb."

"Hang on, let me check." Her brother picked up a large rock and threw it in her direction. Though, instead of hitting her leg, it hit her stomach.

"Ow!" she exclaimed.

"It sounds okay."

"But I didn't feel it in my leg."

"Neither did Hiccup."

"What?"

"What?"

They heard the creaky door hinge at the top of the stairs swing open. Afterward, the heavy footsteps of a dragon master approached them. Drago walked right up to the cell, followed by Eret who received some promiscuous flirts from Ruffnut once again. Neither of the twins bothered to get up as Drago opened the door and stopped in between them.

"Soâ€¦" he said, "You don't know the way to Berk?"

"Nope."

"Not really."

"I could go for a sandwich."

Drago snorted at their lack of seriousness.

"Then I suppose," he continued, "I have no further use of you."

Within a second, he grabbed Tuffnut's throat and lifted his feet off the ground. The dangling twin grabbed at the monster's hands, trying to pry them away as he desperately attempted to breathe.

"Wait!" said Ruffnut, grabbing Drago's arm. "We can at least point you in the right direction!"

Drago raised an eyebrow at her. Smirking, he let Tuffnut fall to the floor, gasping and coughing. As Ruffnut crawled to her brother, Drago slammed the cell door on them.

Turning to Eret, he said, "Ready the ships."

* * *

><p>**Alan-Scottish name meaning "elf" of "spirit"<p>

*After the execution of the Clan Chief MacGregor of Glenstrae in 1570, his widow composed and sang this lullaby lament to her child

29. Chapter 29

A New Destination

Despite Stoick speaking to her, Merida was as lifeless as ever. She agreed to move with them to the Dingwall Clan, but neither her mouth nor eyes said anything. One of the Dingwall men offered her their horse, but she walked a slow and steady pace with the defeated people.

Since they started the hike, Hiccup made sure to stay by Merida and keep her safe. Unfortunately his own mood didn't improve, especially when he learned that two of his own dragon riders were missing in action.

They day began to fade quickly, especially since they had a late start anyway, and the company set up camp in a small area of the woods. They stopped by a small stream so everyone could drink, wash, or tend to their wounds.

Once again, they had a small stew to pass around, and once again, Merida ate none of it. Hiccup had given her a bowl, but she offered it to someone else who took it graciously.

"So," Alan said as he ladled out a bowl for himself, "What's th' next move?"

Hiccup lowered his spoon to his bowl. "What do you mean?"

"Well, we can't jus' let those bastard vikings overrun us. We need ta attack."

"We already attacked." said Merida darkly. "An' we paid th' price."

Alan raised his eyebrows at the sound of the princess' voice. "Well, we have more men, Princess. We could rally an army an' go ta th' castle--"

"As soon as we get there, they'd burn th' entire platoon."

"Then what do ye suggest?"

Merida lowered her head. "Nothin'. Let them take what they want."

Neither Alan nor Hiccup could believe their ears. Not able to hear any more, Hiccup got up, took Merida by the arm and dragged her away from the camp.

"What are ye doin'?" she said once he finally let go of her.

"What are you doing? What did I just hear?"

Merida huffed. "Mah honest opinion."

"No, that was you giving up."

"Aye. And if it was?"

Hiccup rubbed his forehead. "Merida, you never give up on anything."

"Things change."

"Yeah, no kidding!" Frustrated, he leaned his head against a tree. After a while, he turned back to the princess. "I'm sorry. A lot has happened, and you lost a lot. I-â€|but now isn't the time to give up."

"There's nothin' left ta fight for."

Sighing, Hiccup shook his head. He gently took her hand and pressed it to her chest. "Do you feel that?" he said.

She nodded.

"You have life. You have strength. You have people who look up to you." He took her shoulders. "You have people willing to fight and die for you. Don't let those who already lost their lives die in vain."

She sighed. "What right do ah have ta lead them into an attack? They'd all be slaughtered."

"Who said we had to lead an attack?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Wellâ€|how else are we supposed ta fight?"

"We don't have to fight eitherâ€|just change our fate."

Merida's eyes lit up. Before anyone knew, the two of them grabbed a horse and sped off deep into the woods as fast as they could.

****Drago's Quest****

It was a good long while before all the ships were ready to depart. Men ran all around the docks and castle in order to get everything according to Drago's schedule. They hauled barrels and crates as well as livestock into the large ships filling the bay.

Through the direction of Drago, all the dragons either crawled or flew onto the ships where they were put in traps or tied down with rope or chains.

Ruffnut and Tuffnut were led onto the largest ship where the Alpha lay just beneath to point the way. Their legs were free of iron, but

their hands were now bound with shackles and many guards kept them at spear point. Drago was waiting for them at the head of the ship with a dark grimace on his face. Next to him, Eret stood barking orders to many of the men.

"So," Eret started after he was done yelling, "I presume we're in for a long journey."

Drago grunted. "No. You're going to stay here."

Eret raised his eyebrows. "What? I thought--"

"You're going to stay here so you don't mess anything up when we get to Berk." He didn't look at Eret, but his eyes scanned the ship darkly.

Eret sighed. "Look, if it's about the intruders, I had everything under control."

Turning to face him, Drago towered over Eret so he blocked out every inch of sun on his body.

"Wellâ€¦that doesn't mean I can't stay here." Eret said sheepishly. Coughing, he turned and made his way to the dock. As she passed by, Ruffnut tossed him a smirk. Suddenly he didn't feel so bad about getting off the boat.

The twins were shoved toward Drago, and with their hands bound, they pointed in the direction they came from.

"There's like, three islands along the way, but Berk's that way." Tuffnut said.

"We think so anyway. We were flying when we came." Ruffnut shrugged.

Before they could say anything else, Drago ordered them below deck. Just as all preparations ended, they began the long journey.

****Surge of Hope****

Hiccup cursed under his breath as they made yet another jump through the shady glen. In an instant, he and the princess rushed off to a dark part of the woods in order to find a witch.

"I forgot how much of a pain horseback riding is." Hiccup groaned. His entire lower body was in pain as they bounded on as fast as they could.

"We're almost there." said Merida, shouting to him over her shoulder.

Had Hiccup not encountered the witch on his first visit to DunBroch, he probably would never have suggested going to find her. If he had just made presumptions based on Merida's tale, he wouldn't have expected someone so inviting and homely. But he knew the witch. He knew how she was, and that she could help.

"Hiccup," Merida said, "What if she can't help us? Ah only know of one spell she has, an' for all we know she may not even be

there."

Hiccup sighed. "I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

They kept riding on and on, the horse snorting as it ran. After a long while they came to a large clearing. Merida pulled on the reigns, allowing the horse to slow down and stop right in the middle of a ring of stones.

Sliding off the horse, the princess took in her surroundings, breathing in the air and feeling the atmosphere. Hiccup slid off as well, groaning as the entire lower half of his body screamed at him.

Merida turned her attention to one specific stone. Unlike all the others which were long and standing upright, this one had broken and fallen down. Walking toward it, she could remember everything tied to this one stone. It was with this stone that her mother defeated the legendary bear, Mor'du.

Closing her eyes, she kneeled before the rock. She remembered how she turned her mother into a bear, how she fought to change her back, how her mother fought harder to save her—

She opened her eyes quickly once she realized how much pain the memories caused her, so she stood and began walking toward the witch's cottage.

****Red is the Rose****

Hiccup only had a few second to explain to Astrid where he and Merida went before they took off, but she didn't question anything. She was used to Hiccup's sudden adventures and decided to turn her attention to the unconscious Thuggory.

He never woke since the battle, but she figured it was for the best. It was easier to treat his burns with him asleep, especially since he would want to take care of himself.

Astrid chuckled to herself, remembering how this was the second time she had to treat an unconscious, burned patient since recently. Merida was the first. Burns weren't uncommon on Berk, but to have a sleeping subject with such severe injuries was frightening.

Not long after Hiccup and Merida left, the sun descended and the viking fell asleep. She dreamed of nothing as she lied down near the cart where Thuggory lay. The cold began to consume her as she slept, so she pulled her fur hood over her ears.

Despite her ears being covered, it didn't shelter her from the noises outside. She woke up twice to someone in the camp crying out or screaming from a dream, but she always fell asleep after it was all over.

However one cry caught her attention. At first when she woke, all she heard was moaning and she closed her eyes, dismissing it as someone's night terror. But then she realized where the noise was coming from.

Jolting upward, she looked into the cart to see Thuggory moan just

before coughing. Quickly, she rushed to his side.

"Hey, hey. Take it easy." Astrid said as he continued to cough. Finally, his throat cleared and he breathed normally.

"Am I dead?" He said with his eyes still closed.

Astrid giggled. "No, you chucklehead."

He opened his eyes to the darkness of night. "Ohâ€|" He looked at the sky with weary eyes. "It's really dark out."

"Yeah, everyone's supposed to be asleep."

"I don't wanna sleep."

She sighed and sat on the cart next to him. "Then what do you want to do?"

He tried to shrug his shoulders as best he could, but all it did was bring pain. He breathed in harshly through his teeth, and immediately Astrid leaned over and inspected his burns. Figuring it was time to change his bandages anyway, she grabbed some clean cloths.

Thuggory watched as she worked, and a few times he tried to help, but if he tried to lift his right arm or move one muscle on his right side, he clenched up in pain. So he lay helplessly as Astrid carefully removed what bandages she could and cleaned him up.

A bit bored, he opened his mouth and began to sing.

"_Come over the hills, my bonny viking lass_."

Astrid stopped cleaning his wound and looked at him through the darkness.

"_Come over the hills, to you darling._"

"_You choose the road, love, and I'll make the vow._"

"_And I'll be your true love forever_."

He smiled at her with a half-burned face. For a moment, she just sat there, stunned. But then she smirked at him and continued her work and his song.

"_Red is the rose, that in yonder garden grows._"

"_Fair is the lily of the valley._"

"_Clear is the water, that flows from the Boyne_."

They sang the last line together.

"_But my love is fairer than any_."*

Thuggory sighed. "I guess that song doesn't apply to me so much anymore, huh?"

She stopped working and raised an eyebrow at him. "And what makes you

say that?"

"Well, I know what happened. I got burned, and it hurts like crazy. So I'll probably get scarred from it."

Sighing, she reached over and placed a hand on his left cheek. "Yeah, it probably will. But that doesn't mean you're not fair." She stroked his cheek with her thumb before resuming her work. "Besides, what viking is ashamed of battle scars?"

He chuckled. "I'm not ashamed of them. They're a reminder of the two people I pulled from the fire."

Astrid's smile fell. Though it was dark, Thuggory could see her expression fade.

"What's wrong?"

She finished wrapping him up then placed her hands on her lap.

"The two people you saved from the fireâ€¦diedâ€¦They didn't survive from the amount of smoke they inhaled."

He said nothing. For a while he just stared into her face, absorbing the truth. Finally, he let his head fall back as he looked up into the night sky. He said and did nothing. He didn't even sleep at all.

****A Witch in the Woods****

Both Merida and Hiccup had trouble remembering where the witch's cottage was. Neither of them had been there for years, and all the woods were beginning to look the same. The princess kept her ears open, hoping for the wisps to lead them to the cottage, but nothing came. All that entered her ears was the singing birds and the chirping insects who harmonized with the rustling leaves overhead.

Before they re-entered the forest, the horse began to get skittish, so they let him go.

They ventured on for what seemed like hours, wandering an imaginary path. Suddenly, Merida's eyes lit up.

"Ah know this placeâ€¦" she whispered, her eyes searching for something. Then without any warning, she ran off in an uncharted direction. Hiccup sped after her, nearly tripping over some stray roots and fallen branches.

Not long after, they came across a small, wooden house. It was different than how the princess remembered, but it was exactly the same as Hiccup recalled.

With her heart pounding, Merida pushed open the door. But it wasn't how she remembered it at all. Instead of wooden carvings everywhere or a large, magical cauldron steaming with magic, there was a small kitchen with a bed and a table with a few chairs, all sitting next to a warm fireplace.

"Everything looks the same." said Hiccup, looking around the tiny

house.

A sudden realization came to Merida. "Ye've been here before?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, it was four years ago when we went venturing into the woods."

"Hiccup, we went into th' woods many times."

"I'm talking about the time when we got separated. You went off looking for wisps or whatever, and the witch found me and brought me here."

Merida's eyebrows furrowed, trying hard to remember, but it was all for naught. It also didn't help when a small shriek came from behind them.

Quickly turning, they saw a familiar old woman, carrying a few logs in her arms.

"Oh, my." she said. "You gave me quite a scare."

"Uh, sorry." said Hiccup, rubbing the back of his head.

Pushing past them, the witch walked toward her fireplace and dumped her armful of logs to the side.

"I'll admit I wasn't expecting any visitors." she said, placing one of the logs on the fire.

Merida took a step toward her. "We're only here for one thing."

"Oh, princess I know what you're here for. Let me guess," said the witch in a less happy tone, "you want a spell."

Hiccup sighed. "We just want something that can help us. Anything that can help."

The witch finished her work with the fire and pulled out two chairs at the table, gesturing for them to sit.

"We're a kind of in a hurry." said Hiccup. But he sat down anyway.

Humming, the old lady grabbed a couple of mugs from her sink and poured in a mystery drink from a kettle. "I remember you saying you didn't want a spell the first time you came in here." she said, placing the mugs in front of her guests.

"That was years ago." said Hiccup, "Right now the kingdom is under the control of a madman and we need to-"

"Drink up." she said, practically pushing the cup to his lips.

Unable to control the situation, he took a sip from the mug. Gagging, he nearly spat out whatever entered his mouth. It was bitter and smelled like it was made of bark.

"Are ye not listening to us?" Merida said.

Sitting down herself, the witch gestured to the mugs. "I won't help unless you drink it all."

With a soft groan, Merida looked at her cup. Inside was a greenish liquid that didn't look appetizing at all. Both she and Hiccup gave each other a look, then downed the disgusting liquid.

But halfway through his cup, Hiccup screamed and fell over in his chair. He was grasping his left leg in pain and gritting his teeth. Merida ran to him, dropping her mug on the floor.

"What did ye do ta him?" she said harshly.

Sighing, the witch got off her chair. "It must have been quite a wound if it hurts that much."

"What are ye talkin' about?"

Humming a bit, the old woman waited till he stopped writhing in pain before lifting the bandage that secured his arrow wound. Except, there was no arrow wound. His leg had healed over and there was no sign of infection.

Merida's bruises and cuts had healed as well, and the two of them looked at each other in amazement. Chuckling, the witch sat back down.

"Now, then." she said, settling herself. "I know about the kingdom. I am still a citizen after all."

The other two returned to their seat, eager to hear more.

"Though I don't know how much help I'll be."

Merida's eyebrows furrowed again. "What? But yer a witch. Don't ye have some sort of spell or incantation that can help?"

The witch rolled her eyes. "Yes, I'm a witch, but that doesn't mean I'm God. I have limits."

Hiccup gave a heavy sigh. "Well, is there someâ€¦dragon spell that could help?"

"Dragon spell? Oh, my boy. I didn't know dragons existed till those barbarians came burning the place down."

Merida leaned back in her seat. "Well, that's it. We're sunk."

"Wait," said Hiccup, "what about just animals in general? I know you work with bears, but can something you know help?"

The witch thought hard, closing her eyes. But she just shook her head in defeat. Merida's mouth went slightly agape as she felt everything at once. Anger and sadness boiled up within her for having such a false hope, but the grief of it all surpassed everything else. Pulling her hands to her face, she tried to keep her head from swimming.

"Oh! Wait, wait, wait." the witch got down from her chair and quickly walked out the door. All the hope rushed back to Merida and she followed her out the door with Hiccup trailing behind. After they were outside, the witch snapped her fingers and opened the door again.

This time the room was dark and there were candles everywhere lighting the small house. A black cauldron sat in the middle of the room with books and baskets filled with various objects littering the room.

Hiccup looked around in awe at everything, nearly tripping himself over a small chest.

The witch clambered over a variety of objects, then crawled under a small table littered with dead animals, roots and plants of every kind. They could hear her pushing things aside and digging around under the desk till she exclaimed in surprise.

"Oh ho! Here it is!"

She came back out with a large book. It was dusty and covered in something greasy, but they could make out the cover was a dark red. After dusting herself off, she threw the book on the table scattering some of the other items. Standing on a stool, she opened the book and flipped the pages rapidly.

"What is this?" Merida said, peering over her shoulder.

"What, you think every witch is just born with knowledge of spells and potions?"

The pages continued to flip till she stopped them and blew hard against the dusty pages.

"Now then, there are all kinds of spells with animals. There are plenty on turning into a specific animal."

"We'd like ta avoid reliving th' past." Merida said slowly.

"Oh, not all are exactly like your bear spell dearie. There are also spells to give you the instincts of an animal. Or perhaps you'd like to turn animals to stone?"

"Okay, something that won't hurt the dragons please." Hiccup said, trying to read the small text.

The witch sighed. "I could give you the wings of a bird, or the tail of a fish. You could talk to certain animals. I could raise animals from the dead."

As she continued speaking, an idea suddenly came to Hiccup's mind.

"Wait, what was that one before?" he said.

"Hiccup, we are not raising animals from th' dead."

"No, no, no. The one about talking to animals."

The witch looked back to her book. "I don't see why you would need that one."

But Merida understood. She had been there at the battle scene, and she saw what the Alpha did to all the other dragons. Her eyes lit up and she looked to Hiccup.

"If I can talk to Toothless, then maybe I could snap him out of the Alpha's control."

"All depends on how th' spell works." Merida said.

Both of them turned back to the old woman, who was completely lost in the conversation.

"Ahâ€¦well it's a wee bit more tricky than the last spell you had me do. Unfortunately, how this spell works requires two subjects. You and the animal you wish to communicate with."

"If he just gives it to one dragon, would he be able to communicate with all dragons?"

"Well, no. At least, with my experience with rats and squirrels, you can only communicate with the one animal who takes the spell." the witch shrugged her shoulders innocently.

Hiccup sighed, but the news didn't shroud his confidence. "Then we better make sure Toothless get this spell." He nodded to Merida, who gave him a worried look. She was concerned about Hiccup being a part of the spell, mostly because the last spell she encountered wasn't what she expected.

"Well, if you've made up your minds, I best get working."

The old woman got off her stool and set off to making the spell. Snapping her finger, a fire lit beneath the large cauldron. Next she set out to find the various ingredients for the spell. She kept referring back to the book so she didn't mess up, but otherwise she seemed rather lighthearted about her work.

"Spit." she said at one point, holding a jar to Hiccup's face. Hesitantly, he gave up some of his saliva before she mixed it with some odd powder and dumped the mixture in the cauldron.

It seemed the more ingredients she added, the brighter the potion got. Finally she added one last ingredient and the cauldron glowed a burning red before settling as a soft, green liquid.

"Alrighty now." said the witch, and using a long ladle she poured some of the spell into two flasks. One, she handed to Hiccup, the other she stopped with a cork.

Hiccup held the flask away from him, as if he expected it to explode.

"Do I drink it now?" he said.

"It doesn't really matter when. So you best just get it over with." the old woman said, handing the other flask to Merida.

Slowly, he sniffed the liquid, but he couldn't detect anything. Reluctantly, he poured it into his mouth and swallowed hard. Unexpectedly, he tasted nothing. It didn't even feel like anything had entered his mouth. Confused, he gulped again just to make sure he swallowed it.

Merida raised an eyebrow at him. "How do ye feel?" she said.

"Mmâ€|okay I guess." he said, placing the flask on a desk nearby.

Unconvinced, Merida turned to the witch. "He'll start having stomach pains, won't he?"

The old lady chuckled at her. "No. Transformation spells are much different than communication."

The princess looked back to Hiccup, who shrugged. She sighed and nodded, satisfied he was alright. Then she turned back to the old woman.

"Right, name yer price." she said.

The witch raised her eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, c'mon. Ye wouldn't even admit ye were a witch till ah offered ye somethin'. Now what do ye want?"

The witch's mouth gaped, insulted. "I may be an business woman, but that does NOT mean I won't help when my country is in need!"

But Merida just raised an eyebrow and stared the old woman down, who sighed exasperatedly.

"Look, to show my good intentions, I'll let the two of you stay the night."

"That's a nice thought," said Hiccup. "But we should get going as soon as possible and put this plan into action."

The witch shrugged. "But I wouldn't go out after dark. The woods can be mighty treacherous."

"Thank you, we'll make sure ta stop when it gets dark." said Merida, opening the door to leave.

But both she and Hiccup stopped once they looked outside. The sky was blackened and the stars were peeking through the leafy canopy.

"Wha- It was th' middle of th' day just a few minutes ago!" she exclaimed. But as they looked around, there was no denying it was the dead of night. Crickets chirped from all around them as the wind whistled through the bushes and trees.

Not a moment later, the witch shoved the both of them outside, snapped her fingers and entered the cottage, revealing its homely nature again. Chuckling at the two of them, she gestured over to a wash bucket next to her stove.

"Wash up for dinner now. Oh my, I haven't cooked for this many people in years."

****A Few Hours Later****

"Well, you two best get some sleep. You have a big day tomorrow!"

After they finished dinner, the witch gathered all the dishes and threw them in a pile. Afterward, she walked to the door and went outside.

"Where are ye going'?" said Merida.

"Woodcarving. It's never too late to enjoy yourself doing your favorite hobby." Chuckling, she closed the door. Both Merida and Hiccup rushed to the window to see her, but all they saw was the black of night.

"Well, she's right about one thing." said Hiccup. "We should get some rest. We can leave as soon as the sun comes up."

Merida nodded, then without a word curled up next to the fireplace.

"Uh, what are you doing?" Hiccup said slowly. "The bed is over there."

The princess lifted her head to see it, then laid back down. "Mmâ€¦you can have it."

Hiccup shook his head. "No, you should take it. You deserve it and I'm used to sleeping on hard surfaces."

Furrowing her eyebrows, Merida sat up. "What do ye mean '_I_ deserve it'?"

The viking was stunned. "Uhâ€¦well I-â€¦I just meant-"

"What exactly did ah do ta _deserve_ sleeping in th' bed?"

"Wha-â€¦nothing but-"

"Exactly; nothing." turning her back to him she lied back down on the hard floor.

Hiccup sighed, mentally slapping himself in the face. A bit agitated, he took one of the chairs at the table and sat so he could rest his head on the back. As he waited for sleep to overcome him, he looked after Merida as she rested by the fire. He watched as the light from the flames reflected off her body and into his eyes. Soon he could see her breathing steady into a slow pace as she drifted into a deep slumber.

After a while of seeing her like this, he went over to make sure she was asleep. Sure enough, her eyes were closed and her body was limp. Carefully, he picked her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. He tried to be as gentle as possible so she wouldn't wake as he rested her head on the pillow and wrapped her in the covers.

After he was done, he went back to his chair and sat down. With sad eyes, he continued to watch over her. He was amazed how she could look so peaceful after everything that had been done, and he wondered if she would ever look so peaceful when she's awake.

His mind drifted to when they were children. He had been doing this a lot recently, especially when Merida was near, but he always thought to how they laughed, how they joked, and how they smiled.

He missed her laugh; her jokes; her smile. Closing his eyes, he knew he would probably never hear or see such things again. He chuckled at how she would throw snowballs at him randomly as he worked, or how she'd go into the smithy and talk to him, or how she'd toss food at him during dinner.

He remembered how they would go to the library and read, or chase each other down through the hallways, or just venture through the woods. But as soon as he opened his eyes, all he saw was someone who looked like the Merida he knew.

Though once he opened his eyes, he knew something was wrong. Merida was sitting up straight, looking at nothing with silent tears rolling down her cheeks.

"You're awake." he said, lifting his head and stretching his muscles.

She said nothing for a while; she didn't even look at him.

"You okay?" he said, squinting his eyes to see her better. It had gotten so late, the fire died down and only gave a soft light.

"I'm scared." she said.

Hiccup stood up and walked over, sitting at the foot of the bed. "Of what?"

"Dying." Her knees were pulled up to her chest and her fingers were intertwined around them. "But ah also don't want to live."

Hiccup's breath went short. "Why?" He knew all the reasons for her not wanting to live, but he also didn't want her to die.

"Ye said my life was worth fightin' forâ€|but ah have nothin' ta live for."

"What about your people?"

"I don't want them." Merida tucked her knees in further, covering part of her mouth.

"What do you mean?"

Sighing, she let go of her legs and leaned back against the headboard. "Ah don't want to be Queen. Ah'm not a leader or a diplomat. Ah'm just a lost lassie with no parents."

"That's where you're wrong."

She cocked her head slightly.

"You are a leader." he said. "Your brothers are still out there and despite you not wanting to be Queen, those people you lead are also there to support you." Shifting his weight, he took one of her hands. "And never forget you have friends here to help you as well."

"Friends like Cathal?"

Her hand slipped out of his as his entire arm went limp. Hiccup tried to speak again, but a lump caught in his throat. Sighing, he leaned back till his shoulders were square on the wall.

"Yeah," he said with a raspy voice, "friends like Cathal."

For a while, they just sat there in silence. They avoided looking at each other or at anything. Eventually, Merida spoke up again.

"How did ye get over yer mother's death?" she said.

Sitting up again, he looked back to her. "Truth isâ€¦I never didâ€¦"

Blinking, her mouth went slightly agape, as if she couldn't comprehend what he just said.

He gave half a chuckle at her reaction. "I learned to deal with it, but no; I never got over it."

"How did you deal with it?"

He sighed and rubbed a hand through his hair. "Well, at first it was hard. I had nightmares for weeks after she died. Dad took it pretty hard too. Butâ€¦if it weren't for him and Gobber, I'd probably be off sulking in a corner or I'd have let a dragon eat me by now."

"Did ye ever forgive themâ€¦forâ€¦what they did?"

He shook his head. "Noâ€¦and I probably never will."

"Yer dad said th' same thing."

He chuckled. "Runs in the family I guess."

She gave a half smile, but it faded within a second. Looking away she gave a small cough. At first it seemed like nothing, but then he noticed her blinking quite a bit and sniffing away tears.

"You know for the longest time though," Hiccup continued, "I tried so hard not to cry. I guess it was just a way for me to prove that I was strong to my dad. Butâ€¦then one day I found him crying on his and mom's anniversaryâ€¦I guess even vikings can cry sometimesâ€¦"

Merida looked back to him. Her eyes were so wet, they reflected every color in the room now.

"Meridaâ€¦it's okay to cry."

She nodded, sniffing and wiping away the tears that she now allowed to fall.

"Ah know," she said. "Ah jus-â€|Mum always told me how a princess strived for perfection an-â€|Ah only ever saw her cry once, an' dad never criedâ€|"

Curling up, she pressed her eyes into her knees, soaking her dress in tears. At a loss for words, Hiccup sat in silence as she sobbed.

"Your parents may not have cried in front of you," he said, forcing her to lift her head, "but I'm sure they cried many times."

She gave a soft nod and gulped hard before exhaling through another sob. Wiping her face on her sleeve, she got on her knees and crawled over to him, giving the viking a tight hug.

"Thank you, Hiccup."

He embraced her hug, wrapping his arms around her smaller frame. Breathing in, he could smell the sweet fragrance of the glen, and he felt her hot cheek quiver against his ear.

"Ah honestly thought ah didn't have any more tears to shed." she said, her arms still tight around his neck. Letting go, she sat next to him.

"Well, understandableâ€|especially since you drool when you sleep."

Her mouth went agape and she punched him in the arm. "Ah do not!"

He laughed as he rubbed his arm. "Of course it was hard to tell from all the snoring you were doing too."

With a large shove, Merida pushed him off the end of the bed. He would have stopped himself from hitting the hard floor, but he was too busy laughing.

"Ah ought ta kick ye as well." she said, glaring down at him with a smirk.

"Go ahead and try." he said, hoisting himself up and running to the other end of the room just before her leg came in contact with his gut. She chased after him, but he ran and put the table between the two of them, cutting her off. Undefeated, she rolled over the table and tackled him to the ground.

"I win." she said, gently kicking his right ankle. Chuckling, she stood up and held out a hand.

Hiccup grasped it tightly, but once she pulled him to his feet her smile faded.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"How did ye do that?"

"Do what?"

"Ye made me smile. Laugh evenâ€¦|" her face was that of concern and horror. "Ah have no reason ta smile. How did ye do it?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, though you definitely needed it."

A bit bewildered, she sat down in a chair behind her. "Ah suppose ah did." she said softly. The viking pulled up another chair and sat in front of her.

"Just call me your personal jester. I'm clumsy enough for it!"

She chuckled again, but this time she didn't allow her smile to fade. "Ye always knew how ta make me smile again. Thank you." She lifted her hands to his head and gently kissed his forehead. Then before he could do anything else, she stood up and sat by the fire again.

"Ye ought ta get some sleep." she said before curling up and settling near the dying flames and embers.

But once again, Hiccup waited till she slipped into a slumber and carried her body to the bed again.

"Don't worry, Merida." he said, pulling the covers over her. "Soon it'll be all over."

* * *

><p>*Song: Red is the Rose by The High Kings.

30. Chapter 30

Pursuit

After Drago's departure, things quieted down around DunBroch Castle. As soon as the ships were out of sight beyond the horizon line, everyone relaxed and went on about their usual duties. Three days passed, and things couldn't seem more normal. Practically everyone was relaxed as the day went on.

All except a certain trapper who sat in a cold, damp dungeon. Eret was thrown in his own personal cell as soon as the boats took off. Obviously Drago hadn't forgiven him for letting the individuals responsible for infiltrating the castle and killing his men go.

Bored and hungry, he lied on a straw mattress counting the flies that flew past his face. At his foot was a chamber pot that had never been emptied and it smelled worse than a hundred rotting corpses. Sighing he turned over and tried to sleep.

But his eyes shot open once he heard a loud noise above his head. Whatever was happening, it was causing all the men to yell and scream. It was another attack. Eret knew it was from the clashing of swords and the cries of men getting injured.

Sitting up, he tried to look beyond the prison door to see if the guard had left, but he remained at his post. Not that it would matter much for the trapper, as he had no way out of his cell.

Then the most unexpected thing happened. Right outside the door, a loud crash was heard, and the guard grunted before falling to the floor. The door opened, and in ran two people. One was male and had messy brown hair, while the other he recognized right away. She was blonde, and one of the two girls who had attacked the castle nights before.

"It doesn't look like they're here." said the man.

"You!" cried Eret, before the other could respond. The girl looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

"Ohâ€|Eret." she said as if he were someone unimportant.

"You're the reason I'm in here." He gritted his teeth, showing his deep anger.

"Yeah, whatever. Listen, were there two others in here before? A boy and a girl; twins; completely annoying in their own special way."

He scoffed and leaned back against the wall. "Yeah, but they're long gone."

The two looked at each other.

"What do you mean, gone?" the man said.

"I mean, if they're still alive they won't be for long. Drago took them with him."

The stranger furrowed his eyebrows. Obviously he didn't like the news, but soon he turned to leave.

"Wait," said the girl. "Where did Drago go?"

"Like I'd tell you."

"I could kill you instead."

"And put me out of my misery? Go ahead."

The girl raised her axe, ready to swing at his head, but another body came running through the door and down the steps.

"Astrid! Hiccup! Are they here or not?" It was a redhead with a bloody sword and a bow on her back.

"No," said Astrid, "Drago left with them."

"Ah, Merida DunBroch if I remember correctly." Eret said, standing up.

Merida stared at him, her sword gripped tightly in her hand. Her eyes studied him for the longest time with furrowed eyebrows, but then she leaned over to Astrid and whispered, "Who's this?"

"Wha- I'm Eret, son of Eret!" he yelled, offended that she didn't remember him. "Greatest dragon trapper alive!"

"You're not going to be alive much longer if you don't tell us where Drago is." Astrid lifted her axe again in a rather threatening fashion.

Drago took a step away from the bars. "Like I said, I could care less if you killed me now or later. There is no way I'd lead you to Drago."

Just then, Merida sheathed her sword and stormed up to the cell. Reaching through the bars, she took hold of the front of his shirt and slammed him forward into the bars.

"Listen here." she said. "Drago killed mah parents, took my kingdom, and burned mah village. Ah have been to hell and back and I am pissed. Now tell me where he is." Her voice was dark and her teeth bore as if she was about to bite his face off.

He remained motionless with his cheek pressing into the cell bars, allowing him time to think. But for everyone else, it seemed as though time had stood still and he would never talk.

"I'll tell you." he said with a smashed face. "But on one condition: You have to get me out of here." Eret smirked, knowing this would be his one chance to escape.

Merida raised an eyebrow as she studied his face even more. Eventually she rolled her eyes, let him go and started walking toward the door. She grabbed the guard's keys and unlocked Eret's door. But as he stepped forward to exit, she took her bloody sword and raised it to his throat.

"Try anythin' funny an' ah'll slit yer throat." she said.

He nodded slowly and she allowed him to move forward. Astrid grabbed him by the collar and Hiccup led the way out. As they moved through the castle, Eret could see it wasn't just the three of them. Merida, Hiccup and Astrid brought an entire Scottish army who were now running through the castle on a rampage.

"Princess!" one of them called as they dragged Eret through the throne room. Merida turned to see one of her men run up to her. "We've taken th' leaders an' secured the castle."

Merida placed a hand on his shoulder. "Thank you. I'll be takin' this one with me an' the fleet. Keep yer men here an' make sure the castle stays safe. We'll be back in at least a week."

"Yes, ma'am." He bowed and ran off to give more orders.

The three of them continued on, making their way outside and to the docks. There, an entire fleet of ships stood ready for departure. After they stayed at the witch's cottage, Merida and Hiccup headed straight for Dingwall land, where they told their plan and used an entire day to organize an army to lead. The only one to stay behind was Thuggory, due to his still severe injuries.

Astrid dragged Eret to the first ship and shoved him on board.

"Took you guys long enough!" Fishlegs said, running up to them. "Is Ruff and Tuff with you?"

Hiccup shook his head. "They weren't there. But this guy is going to tell us where they are." He gestured over to Eret.

Brushing himself off, Eret stood straight and tall despite being in a prison cell for the past three days.

"Since he learned where you dragon riders came from, Drago planned to go to Berk, probably to take all of your dragons." He turned to Fishlegs. "That's why he needed your friends. He's using them to find Berk."

"Then Berk is where we're going." a deep voice said. Stoick had come aboard after talking with some of the men staying behind.

Hiccup nodded and he went to speak with the ship captain. A bubbling rage began to form within both chiefs, knowing their village was soon to be attacked.

"Alright, thanks. Yer free ta go." Merida nodded to Eret.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Really? That's it? You're just going to let me go?"

"Ye held up yer end of th' bargain, no one can ask any more of ye."

"No, I mean, you're letting me go alive?"

The princess sighed and turned to him. "Believe me, ah was tempted ta kill ye many times already. But ah'm not a monster." She turned to walk away, but he followed.

"Well, in that case, I guess I'll stick around."

"An' why would ye want ta do that?"

"Well, I'm already on Drago's bad side. And besides, I don't belong on your land."

"Aye, that much is true." she quickly turned to face him. "But there's somethin' about ye that makes me suspicious."

His did his best to keep his eyes from shifting out of nervousness. "What is that?"

"Drago murdered hundreds of people without a second glance. Why would he just leave ye alive in a prison cell?"

Eret smirked at her. "Torture. Drago likes to make his victims suffer, whether by drowning in ice-cold water, being burned alive, or starving to death in a dirty prison. I got lucky by being thrown in that cell, but that doesn't mean it was all flowers and cakes in there."

Taking a step back, Merida sighed. "Fine, ah'll allow ye ta come along." she raised her sword to his neck again. "But mah last warning still stands."

He took a bow. "On my honor as a dragon trapper, I promise to fight

alongside you and not touch a hair on your or your men's heads."

She lowered her blade and went to the helm. Standing proud and tall, she called her men to attention. Everyone turned to face her, despite what they were already doing.

"Drago is already days ahead of us!" she shouted, "but with th' help of the wind and ocean, we may be able to catch them. Even if he makes it ta Berk before we catch him, will we stand by idly and let him take another civilization?"

There was a cry of opposition ringing through the fleet.

"If we fail, Drago will return an' take our lives, our land, and our freedom! He will burn our clothes and torture our children! Will we let him return?"

The crew screamed again, the pride of their kingdom swelling in their hearts.

"Then let us go an' send the bastard ta hell!"

****Berk****

Thanks to the twins' obscure directions; it took Drago almost two full weeks to reach Berk. By then he was just about ready to throw one of them overboard. But once he caught sight of the island on the horizon, his heart began to race faster out of anticipation.

"Bring out the Night Fury." he said to one of the men.

"But sir, what about these two?" he gestured to the twins, who were tired and weary from the journey. They had been given little to eat, and along the way, Drago became frustrated and would beat one or the other for information.

"Throw them overboardâ€¦I have no use for them now."

The two vikings were dragged away to the edge of the ship, where they were directed at spear point to the plank.

"So this is it, huh?" Tuffnut said, looking to his sister. "This is how we die?"

"Well, how far is the island?"

"Pretty far."

Ruffnut nodded slowly, "Well, not how I imagined I'd go."

"I know, right? I always thought I'd die falling into the mouth of a volcano while battle a shark."

"I wanted to ride out a tornado while causing a mutiny on a pirate ship."

"Shut up!" the guard leading them shouted, and he pushed them closer to the edge.

"Do we get any last words?" Ruffnut said.

The guard groaned. "No, and for that remark, it can be ladies first!"

"Oh, then I guess it's your turn." Ruffnut and her brother laughed at the guard, who blushed deeply and in embarrassment, pushed them both overboard.

Looking over the edge, he didn't see their heads rise above the water. There was only the foam of their entering the ocean.

Upon seeing the twins fall, a dark smile crept onto Drago's face. Soon, Toothless was brought to him, his eyes dilated as proof he was still under the control of the Alpha dragon. With as much roughness as possible, Drago mounted the helpless dragon and gave him a few new scratches in the process.

The poor Night Fury flapped into the air to where a massive amount of bubbling rose to the surface of the water. Giving his famous yell, Drago summoned the white Alpha, who burst out of the water in as much majesty as he did at Scotland. Once Dragon pointed toward the little island of Berk, the dragon set its course.

To the Berkians on the island afar, the spectacle was truly a thing to behold. At first, they looked to the strange beast in curiosity. But as it approached, more and more of the dragons on Berk fell under its control, causing more and more fear to instill in the hearts of the people.

By the time Drago reached their shores, all of the dragons were on his side. Spitelout and Gobber ran to the front, ready for anything.

But as soon as the signal was given, the Alpha blew his icy breath.

31. Chapter 31

****Battle of Berk****

By the time the small fleet of Scottish ships reached Berk, the entire island was covered in ice. Astrid covered her mouth and Stoick nearly fell at the sight. The Alpha was leaning on the island, half its body still in the water with all the dragons surrounding him. Drago flew at the front, giving commands for the dragons to go out and hunt their own vikings.

Hiccup stood at horror of hearing children scream at the very dragons they used to play with. Everything he worked so hard for was falling apart.

Merida turned to her men. "Listen! Your job is ta protect th' people. If ye can, avoid killing th' dragons but get anyone who can't fight out of the open an' somewhere safe! Understood?"

But her army barely had time to answer when Drago caught sight of their small fleet. Seeing the ships, he directed his attention on them, commanding the Alpha to fight. The large, white dragon turned, opened its large mouth, and within seconds, a blast of ice began

rushing toward them.

"Abandon ship!" The princess cried, and everyone jumped off the side as fast as they could before the ice destroyed half the ships.

It wasn't long before another icy breath came and took out the remaining boats, all who survived forced to swim to shore.

The Alpha's attack floated as icebergs among the wreckage, but as soon as Drago saw the bobbing heads in the water, a wave of dragons descended on them. Some of the men were picked out of the ocean like fish, other tried to dive deep down to avoid the claws of the dragons. Unfortunately, many leviathan dragons were sent as part of the wave, and one by one, the men disappeared under the water.

The shore was far, but a few of those who came managed to clamber near the rocky surfaces. Gasping for breath, Merida heaved herself on a rock just as a Timberjack caught her between its teeth. It flew high in the air, clamping its teeth on her right leg as she screamed.

One of her men shot an arrow that hit the dragon in the neck, causing the beast to release her. She hurled down toward the earth and crashed through someone's roof. Upon impact, the wind was knocked out of her, causing her breathing to stop short. Her back was burning and her leg oozed out precious blood.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the family of the house she crashed into. There was a father, a mother, and two children, both under the age of six. She tried to smile at them, let them know everything was alright, but at the moment it seemed like she couldn't even move.

Meanwhile, Hiccup had managed to find shelter in the Cliffside among the rocks and seaweed. He beckoned to everyone else to follow him, but more and more warriors were being picked out of the water and dragged away.

Fishlegs was having trouble especially since he couldn't swim very well, but he had the luck of Stoick protecting him. The old chief used his hammer to swat away and smash the head of every dragon that came toward them. Eventually, the two of them made it to where Hiccup was calling.

"What do we do now?" Fishlegs said sputtering water and shivering against the cold.

"Improvise." said Hiccup. "There should be at least a few Whispering Death tunnels around here. We can use them to get to the village."

"But wouldn't the Whispering Deaths be in there?"

Hiccup leaned out as far as he could from his haven, trying his best not to be spotted.

"It seems like Drago is keeping most of the dragons next to him. I think we can get through, just as long as no one knows we're here."

But it was hard trying to not be spotted as more and more men clambered over the rocks, trying to get to safety.

Finally, the small trio found a large tunnel leading through the island. Quickly, they scrambled in one after the other and ran as fast as they could. The screams of men, women and children echoed through the cavern, sending chills down their spines as they ran. Soon, there was no light at all to guide their way, and Hiccup used his inferno sword as a beacon.

They ran forever, turning this way and that, trying to find an exit of some sort. But it seemed they had run themselves into a maze.

"Should we try splitting up?" Fishlegs asked when they came to yet another dead end.

"No," said Stoick, "that's probably the worst thing to do right now."

Fishlegs was getting jittery now. "But we could try more paths and if one of us finds it we can go back and make a trail or something."

"Fishlegs, no one else has any sort of torch or light source, and this isn't a luxurious shrub maze, this is war. And we are stuck down here while Drago is killing everyone up there!" Stoick yelled, trying to bring some sense into him. But all it did was make poor Fishlegs panic even more.

Dropping his sword on the ground, Hiccup grabbed Fishlegs by the shoulders and shook him harshly.

"Listen to me! You need to calm down. Yes, we're lost. But we need to keep our heads if we want to get out of here."

The viking boy's lip quivered, but he nodded. Hiccup gave him a reassuring smile, then picked up his blazing sword and started to walk again. But everyone stopped when they heard a small rumbling. The ground and walls all around them began to quake and the three of them froze.

The dragons had entered the caverns.

****Meanwhile on the Shores****

Since both Merida and Hiccup disappeared, Astrid took control of the remaining army. The cliff was too steep to climb, and it would only tire everyone out. With no one else to direct them, the men followed her around the island and through the forest. Eventually, they made it back to the village, but there were still tons of dragons waiting for them.

"Alright," Astrid said, turning to the warriors, "we need to get to the shed by the smithy. We still have a bunch of dragon fighting tools and weapons there, and we need all we can get."

Fionnlagh, the first Scott she met in DunBroch, began climbing a tree close to the edge of the forest. As he neared the top, he called down to her.

"Where is it?"

"It's in a clearing, surrounded by houses." she said. "It's down near the bottom of the hill, but not too close to the ocean. We should only be a few yards away from it."

"I see it." Fionnlagh said, and he climbed back down, awaiting more orders.

"Drago will see us coming, so we need to move as fast as possible."

"I suggest a diversion." Fionnlagh added in. "A few of us can distract him while everyone else gets to the smithy."

Astrid nodded and he grabbed a few other men he trusted, and moved far away from them. After a little while, they emerged from the tree line and ran out to the open. Immediately, dragons surrounded them and began attacking. They snapped and bit as they dived all around them, some of them only taunted and flicked their tails at them.

Once they saw the battle ensue, Astrid and the rest of them began to run. They sprinted from the trees and made it to the smithy without many of them getting caught.

"Gobber!" she called, running through the shop as all the others ran to the shed. "Gobber where are you?"

She ran back outside and called out louder. As she went looking for the blacksmith, the Scotts grabbed as many weapons as they could and began fighting against the dragons. Some of the weapons seemed unfamiliar, but soon there were viking warriors joining them and fighting alongside them, showing them how to use the tools.

Eventually, Astrid found Gobber among the fighting crowd. He was swinging an axe on his prosthetic hand as a Gronckle hit him with its tail.

"Gobber!" Astrid cried as she ran to him. And before he could say anything or even question why she was there, she grabbed his arm and pointed toward his shop. "Fire up the smithy! We need weapons and fast! From now on, you're our rest stop. There will be men coming, and you'll need to get them swords, axes, hammers, whatever they need to fight!"

"Astrid! But Grump is in the air! How am I supposed to-"

"YOU'RE A VIKING! YOU'VE FOUGHT DRAGONS FOR MOST OF YOUR LIFE YOU CAN LIGHT A STUPID FIRE WITHOUT A DRAGON!"

A bit embarrassed, Gobber hobbled over to his smithy and lit the fires. It seemed like old times as he hammered the hot metal and forged the weapons to the right shape as dragons flew by, spewing flames through the town while everyone else fought them off.

But now they were fighting with strangers as the dragons they once loved were being controlled by a madman.

The blacksmith was busy sharpening a sword for a Celt when he noticed a small rumbling under his feet. Setting the sword aside, he ran outside. The rumbling was coming from everywhere, and soon dragons burst from the ground. It was as if a volcano exploded, but instead of lava there were dragons of every shape and size bursting out of the dirt and into the sky.

The dragons erupted in houses, in the streets, and even from the wells where they drew water. After they came out of the ground, the dragons dive-bombed the humans, snatching them up and either dropping them or continuing to maim them in the air.

Soon a great amount of them made a formation and dove straight for a small group of Vikings and Celts. It was a spectacular thing to see, but when you're the target, you don't spend much time staring in awe at the animals about to kill you.

The dragons were about to come upon the small group, when a rain of rocks fell on them, hitting most of the dragons and sending them off course.

Looking up, Gobber saw Astrid had found the old catapults they used in dragon attacks. Now she was busy with others trying to reload the old machine, but another group of feral beasts was forming.

Hurriedly, he ran back to his smithy to get a weapon when he heard a familiar voice.

"Run!" it said. It was distant, yet he knew it was close.

"They're coming!" said another voice. This one was so familiar, there was no way he'd forget it.

"Stoick?" Gobber said, and he turned around, expecting to see him running through the streets. But he wasn't there.

"Help!" another voice popped up. It was Fishlegs.

Confused, the blacksmith turned to one of the holes the dragons made when bursting out of the earth. Hesitantly, he leaned over the hole.

"Stoick? Hiccup? Fishlegs?" he called. For a moment, there was no answer. Then the distant voice of his chief called back.

"Gobber! Is that you?" Hiccup's voice echoed from the hole.

Gobber rested his hand/hammer on his hips. "What in Thor's name are you doing down there?"

"No time to explain! Just keep talking!" They sounded as though they're out of breath, and their voices fluctuated. Obviously there were running through the tunnels.

"Erm, why do I need to keep talking?"

"We can't get out! We're using your voice as a guide to the surface!"

"Ohâ€¦well what do you want me to say?"

"Anything!"

"Hmâ€¦well I just saw Astrid. She's manning the catapults now. Though she could use some help. By the way, why are all these men here? Where are they from?"

"They're Merida's men. We brought them once we knew Drago was coming to attack."

"Who's Drago?"

"The man sitting on my dragon trying to kill everyone!"

Gobber looked over to Drago, narrowing his eyes at him. It wasn't hard to spot the Night Fury in the daylight, but the large, dark man sitting on top was discomfoting.

"Gobber!" Hiccup's voice called again, though it was much closer.

The blacksmith looked back down the hole, and he could see a small orange light near the bottom.

"How are we supposed to get up?" Fishlegs said nervously.

"Gobber, could you lower a rope? Dragons are in the tunnel, they're coming for us!" Stoick called.

"Hang on!" Gobber ran as fast as he could to grab rope from his smithy.

But the three in the hole didn't have much time. They could hear the howling and screeches of dragons getting closer. After what seemed like an eternity, Gobber finally came running back with a long rope, ready to haul up whoever was first.

They tied Fishlegs, who was still panicking, to the end and slowly Gobber hoisted him up.

"They're getting closer." Hiccup said quietly, as Fishlegs was only halfway up.

"Don't worry, son." Stoick said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

But the approaching noises were menacing. They could hear the wings of countless dragons hunting them and scraping against the cavern walls. Many of them let out a loud roar, warning the two vikings of their presence.

At last, Fishlegs made it to the top and they threw the rope back down. By now there were many others who noticed the struggling blacksmith and came to help pull Fishlegs out.

"Alright dad, you next." Hiccup said, handing the rope to his father. But Stoick shook his head.

"Even if we make it out, they'll just follow us and attack on the

surface." he said softly.

"Yeah, but it's better that we fight them up there instead of in here, let's go dad."

Stoick sternly grasped his son's shoulders and held firm. "As ridiculous as this plan is, you need to get up there and get that potion to Toothless with the least amount of distractions."

"â€|Dad what are you-"

"A chief protects his own."

Without another word, Stoick tied the rope around Hiccup and ran off into the darkness, yelling and screaming at the dragons hunting him.

"Dad!" Hiccup tried to reach out to his father, but the men above already began pulling him up. In a desperate attempt, he threw his sword where his father disappeared, but there were only brief shadows. Soon he could hear nothing but the echoing dragon roars.

When he was dragged onto the ground, Hiccup crumbled and fell apart, knowing his father was still down in the caverns fighting countless dragons. His disheveled state only lasted a minute, and with hateful eyes he looked up to Drago, sitting atop his best friend.

In a flash, the Viking Chief ran to the middle of the town and screamed up to the sky.

"Drago!" he cried. "Drago you coward! Come down here and I'll show you what a true Dragon Master is!"

During the entire fight, Drago Bludvist had been sitting comfortably in the air riding the rarest dragon in the Archipeligo. Just as Eret predicted, Drago preferred to watch his victims suffer. For a day, he watched as dragon hunted their riders, eliminating his threats one by one. Many had already died even before the Scotsmen had made it to their shores, but now it seemed like a bloodbath. Realizing a larger threat had come, Drago sent all of the dragons down to fight instead of the slow and steady process he had already been using.

Among all the fighting and screaming, it was hard to notice the small voice far down below of an angry chief calling him. But he couldn't help but acknowledge the tiny figure standing out of the crowd with no weapon and head raised.

Smirking, Drago puffed out his chest and looked down his opponent with pride. He knew what the dragon rider wanted, and who was he to deny him? With as much poise as possible, he slowly descended and grounded the Night Fury.

Hiccup approached his enemy carefully, being careful not to get too close to the beast. His anger over his father subsided for a moment, and he remembered what he needed to do.

"Well, Chief Hiccupâ€|what do you think?" Drago gestured to the gruesome scene around them.

Hiccup took a deep breath. "I think you're wrong about dragons. They are intelligent, gentle creatures. And I can prove that you have no power over them."

"Oh? You can prove it, can you? Please, dear dragon rider, prove it to me." The dark man lowered his spear and an ugly grin made its way onto his face.

Getting close to the earth, Hiccup crawled over to Toothless so he was eye-level with him. The Night Fury's pupils were still narrow and cold, giving no emotion and no reaction.

"Toothless." Hiccup whispered. "Toothless, I'm sorry bud."

For a moment it seemed like the dragon's eyes began to dilate to their original, happy state, but it only lasted for a split second.

Seeing this, the chief crept closer. "I'm sorry for being mad, it wasn't your fault."

His eyes flashed again. Even his bared teeth began to slip back into his gums in a non-threatening state before falling back out.

"I'm sorry I let you go. I'm sorry I let them do this to you. I'm sorry for everything."

By now Hiccup was so close; he could press the precious dragon's head to his. More and more it seemed like Toothless was coming back, like he was regaining control over his body.

This was not overlooked by Drago. He was confused, but he was angrier and lifted his spear in the air, calling the Alpha's attention. Now it was more focused, more powerful over the small, ebony dragon.

"No," said Hiccup. "I won't let you go—I promise I won't let you go." Tears began to well in his eyes and slowly, he reached into his vest and pulled out a small vial with green liquid.

"Enough!" Drago screamed, seeing the potion. Swinging his spear, he knocked Hiccup away.

The spear made a large gash in his left arm, but when he looked up he saw Drago and Toothless ready to take off. As quickly as he could, he leaped out and grabbed onto Toothless' leg before his large wings beat down and launched them into the air.

Despite being small for a viking, Hiccup's weight threw off Toothless' flight and they began spinning out of control. Drago tried to throw Hiccup into the air and away from them, but he couldn't pry him away from the dragon's scaly leg.

The wind rushed in their ears and they were falling and spinning out of control up and down through the air. But the most spectacular thing was what Drago did not pay attention to. While he tried to kick the chief off, Toothless' eyes still flashed in recognition, as though he was still fighting for his right to choose.

Clutching the vial in his right hand, Hiccup struggled to stay close

to the Night Fury's body. The constant wind change and gravitational direction came to his advantage as Drago was thrown around and prevented from fully tearing him away. But even someone was inexperienced as Drago was able to adjust and attacked.

In a fury, he thrust his spear at Hiccup who only managed to grab it before it struck him. With the vial in one hand and the spear in the other, Hiccup now only clung to the dragon with his legs. With a cry, Hiccup tried to pull the large spear away from the deadly man. But Drago was much larger and, inevitably, much stronger. With a forceful pull he took control over his spear again and stabbed it into Hiccup's abdomen.

The Chief of Berk screamed, and as all the energy left his body, his legs released the dragon and he fell, the vial also falling from his hand.

But the scream was all he needed. In a flash, Toothless heard his friend's cry and dove to save him. For a moment it seemed like he was flying blindly, but no amount of mind control could separate him and his forbidden friendship. He regained consciousness, and his eyes reverted to their familiar state.

But he was too late, and Hiccup's bleeding body fell right onto the Alpha's head.

****Revenge Never Tasted Sweeter****

For a moment, all Hiccup could feel was pain. Pain where he was struck and sliced, then pain in his ears and brain. Then his tongue and teeth burned and flamed as though someone shoved a torch in his mouth. There were so many voices rushing through his head, he had no idea what was going on.

Clutching the sides of his head, he tried to ease them, but they only seemed to get louder. All different kinds of voices: men, women, and children echoed through his ears. He screamed and shouted, trying to drown them out, but soon one voice stuck out above all others.

"_**Who is there?**"_

Hiccup's eyes opened quickly. The voices didn't cease, but they became easier to deal with.

The voice spoke out again. _**"Who is screaming? What's going on?"**_ The voice was deep and powerful, but there was a sense of fear to it.

Grunting, Hiccup struggled to get up. Then he realized where he was. He was sitting right between the blue eyes of the Alpha dragon.

"_**Master, what's going on? Who's there?"**_"

Suddenly Hiccup realized what was going on. Leaning over he placed a hand on the dragon's faded skin and opened his mouth.

"_**My name is Hiccup. I'm here to help you."**_ The words slipped out of Hiccup's mouth with shrill shrieks and popping noises. In

fact, they didn't sound much like words at all.

"_**Hic-cup? Why aren't you under my control? Master told me to take control of everyone."**_

Hiccup sighed and he knew. The Alpha had taken the potion. Gulping hard, he spoke again.

"_**I'm not a dragon. I'm a human."**_

The Alpha's large nostrils snorted, and its eyes shifted around as if they were searching for something.

"_**Master told me to kill all humans."**_

"_**Why do you listen to him?"**_

"_**Because I have to."**_

"_**But why?"**_

Suddenly another voice entered the conversation. _**"Get away from him!"**_

This voice was less harsh, less deep, and seemed almost familiar. Lifting his head, he saw Toothless on the ground, looking right at him.

When he regained control over his own body, Toothless tried to dive to save Hiccup. But Drago thrust him away and the both of them crashed to the ground. Now it appeared Toothless knew who the Alpha was speaking to.

The Alpha lifted its massive head and looked straight at Toothless. Hiccup nearly fell off as it did, but he clung to one of its many spikes that stuck out of its face.

"_**You should be under my control."**_ said the Alpha, and directed its gaze upon Toothless.

"_**No! Leave him alone!"**_ Hiccup cried. Immediately Toothless snapped away from its control and looked to his direction.

"_**Hiccup?"**_ said Toothless, looking at him with a puzzled look. _**"You speak our language?"**_

The viking sighed. _**"It's a long story, but bottom line is- LOOK OUT!"**_

Drago had gotten up and was now charging the uncontrollable dragon. His spear raised, he prepared himself to stab the creature.

Then the most unexpected thing happened. Merida came, sword blazing with a bloody leg, and blocked Drago's attack. Her dress was ripped and torn, and most of the skirt had been ripped off to make a bandage, but in spirit she felt as healthy and full as she never felt in her life. The red rage boiled within her, and she raised her weapon ready to strike down the man she despised most.

She attacked, curls running wild and death buried in her eyes. Drago managed to parry, but her ghostly sight was enough to throw anyone off. She attacked again, but this time she nicked his fake arm. Drago realized he needed to stay on point if he wished to survive this battle.

As the fight went on, Toothless ran up to the Alpha, climbed its large tusks and nabbed his rider before sprinting off into the air. Hiccup quickly took his rightful place in the saddle and the two of them went flying as they never had before.

"_**You should stay away from that monster."**_ Toothless said as they circled the Alpha. _**"She has the ability to control every dragon in the world."**_

Hiccup's eyebrows rose. _**"Waitâ€|SHE?"**_

"_**Yesâ€|not every dragon is male, you know."**_

"_**Yeah, I know butâ€|"**_ The viking looked carefully at the Alpha, then to the menace fighting with Merida. Suddenly a thought came to his head and he flew right by the Alpha's head.

While he spoke to the giant dragon once again, Merida continued her fight with Drago. Her attacks were strong and skilled, but Drago's defense was still rather impressive. But with every swing and block, Drago's energy began to fall, whereas Merida's seemed to rise with the fight.

"How?" Merida cried at one point, "How can ye still sleep at night when ye've killed hundreds of innocent lives?"

Drago paused for a moment. "Oh, you were there in Scotland. I remember now. That Night Fury was supposed to kill you."

She attacked hard, slicing part of his cheek open. "Well remember this: I am Merida DunBroch." she attacked again, but he parried her blade away. "I am the daughter of Fergus and Elinor, the first in line to the throne," she attacked quickly with her sword and tripped him with her good leg, "and ah'm th' one who's going to kill you."

Pressing her leg to his chest, she made sure he couldn't get up. Then she raised her sword for the final blow. She was just about to swing down when-

"Merida, WAIT!"

Out of surprise, Merida stopped her blade. Hiccup and Toothless flew back down, both with horrified and ferocious faces. As soon as they were on the ground, Hiccup grabbed Drago by the front of his shirt and pulled him close to his face.

"Where are they?" he said darkly. Never before had he seemed so angry, so upset.

"What are you talking about?" Drago said with furrowed eyes.

Hiccup shook him hard. "The Alpha's eggs! You stole the Alpha's dragon eggs and are using them to control her!"

Drago smirked, then spat in Hiccup's face. Out of fury, the chief struck him across the face.

"ANSWER ME!"

"Hit me all you want, you'll never find those eggs. And so long as they're in my possession, that dragon must do everything I say." With his own large fist he punched Hiccup in the cheek, sending him tumbling backwards.

"And that means, killing you as well." After standing on his own, Drago gave a howling yell and pointed with his arm toward Hiccup.

The Alpha looked to Hiccup with sad eyes, but there was nothing she could do. Slowly she opened her mouth and prepared for her attack. At last, a rain of ice came upon him, but not before Toothless jumped into the ice with him.

"No!" Merida cried, and she ran to the block of shimmering ice and banged her hands against it. "No, no, no! Hiccup!" She sobbed and choked, trying her best to bring them back, but it was all for naught.

But just as she was about to lie down in defeat, something mysterious happened. The ice started glowing. In fact, it glowed brighter and brighter with every second before it finally exploded into thousands of tiny pieces.

Sitting in the middle of the damaged ice was Toothless and Hiccup. But the Night Fury's black scales glowed blue and his eyes shone with majesty. As the dust cleared, he gave a loud roar and approached Drago with menacing eyes.

"_**YOU WILL NOT HURT HIM!**_" he said, crawling closer to the man. Then he turned his attention to the Alpha.

"_**I WON'T LET ANY OF YOU HURT HIM!**_"

At first, Drago was overcome with fear, but when a man has dealt with fear for most of his life, one learns to get over it quickly. So in a hurry he called the Alpha to attention and commanded her to kill the Night Fury.

But nothing happened.

Drago turned to the Alpha. She was quivering, but there was no doubt she heard him. She knew what he wanted to do, but now she refused.

Drago's blood began to boil. He yelled again, spitting in the process and screaming louder than ever. But she still didn't move. In fact, none of the dragons were moving now. She released all of them from her power and they all stood watching the glowing dragon as he protected his human friend.

Confidently, Hiccup stood by Toothless and placed a hand on his neck.

"You see, Drago." he said, "Dragons are not slaves, they're not weapons, but great beings that feel, learn, and protect. If you gain a dragon's trust, there is nothing he won't do for you!"

Drago looked around, and Hiccup expected him to see the goodness of dragons and their bright intelligence, but all he saw was a terrible war.

"No, they're nothing but animals. And this time I'll prove it!" Drago picked up his spear and began running toward the first dragon to ever show defiance. Toothless prepared a plasma blast at the back of his throat, ready to attack when-

An arrow flew straight into Drago's mouth and stuck out of the back of his head.

"Go to hell." Merida said as his body went limp and his lifeless face fell to the ground.

That was the end of Drago Bludvist.

32. Chapter 32

****Bandages****

There were many wounded after the Battle of Berk. Almost all the men and dragons needed to be treated in some way, and all those who were in life-threatening situations had to be taken to Gothi, Berk's elder and healer. Hiccup ended up in this category and spent a lot of time lying on a table getting stitches for his spear wounds in his stomach and arm.

He wanted to get up and speak to the Alpha who was still sitting outside, but Gothi wouldn't allow it and hit him with a stick every time he tried to move.

Merida had minimal damage to most of her body, but her dragon bite on her leg made her lose a lot of blood, and she ended up passing out not long after she killed Drago. So she too was brought to Gothi, but all she could really do was stitch up her bite injuries and wrap it tight, meanwhile spreading some weird herb paste on a large bruise on her back.

Astrid's shoulder got dislocated from a Boulder Class dragon running into her, and she had to wear a sling once someone finally put it back in place.

It turns out, the twins did survive, but they were so water-logged, they passed out on the beach by the forest. One of the Scotsmen found them and dragged them to safety as the battle raged on.

Stoick, however, was pulled out of the caverns beaten and mauled, but alive. He had burns and scratches of every kind crawling all over his body, the mark of every dragon stained onto his skin. He was brought to Gothi, and for the entire day he lay unconscious on the table next to his son.

It wasn't until the middle of the night when Hiccup finally got the opportunity to sneak out. Gothi was sleeping pretty heavily as was

everyone else, so he was able to lift himself off the table, find a shirt and walk outside without waking a soul.

Once outside, he found the Alpha resting in the water by the docks. As his prosthetic scraped across the wooden planks, she lifted her head and looked at him.

Looking up, he felt satisfyingly happy to see her eyes. When Drago had control of her, the whites of her eyes were bloodshot and looked as though she had been crying. Now they were less red and looked as though she had been able to rest a bit.

"I was afraid you left." Hiccup said in the dragon language, looking up at the magnificent creature.

"I was waiting for you." she said, and the corners of her mouth began to rise as if she was smiling.

"I'm sorry about your eggs. I wish we could've found out where they were."

The Alpha breathed slowly. **_"That man wouldn't have told anyone in a thousand years. I've been around him long enough to know that much. So I'm glad he's dead. The only regret I have is that I didn't finish the job long ago."_**

Hiccup nodded. If Drago Bludvist never existed, so many lives could've been spared; so many heartbreaks could've been spared.

"What are you going to do now?" Hiccup said. He and his men had already searched all of Drago's ships, and they found no trace of any dragon eggs.

The giant beast sighed. **_"I must find my eggs. They are my future, and the last of the Alpha species."_**

"Will you be going alone?"

"Every King has his kingdom. So no, I will not. Many of the dragons still here were of my domain, and they will return with me."

"When will you be going?"

"Eager to be rid of me I see."

"N-no that's not what I-"

"My dragons and I will leave in the morning after they have all rested."

Hiccup nodded, **_"I wish you a safe journey."_**

"And I must thank you, Dragon Rider. You and that Night Fury showed me true loyalty, friendship, and something I forgot long ago: honor. I can see it flow within both of you, and I hope it stays there till the day your heart stops. He is the true Alpha, and you are the true King. May you reign in righteousness and kindness."

He bowed deeply to the dragon. And with that, he turned and walked away, allowing the dragon its first night of peaceful sleep. Gently, she rested her head back in the water and closed her eyes, allowing the dark ocean waves to lap against her large body.

As Hiccup continued up the path, a familiar black face bounded up to him.

"Toothless!" Hiccup laughed as the black dragon pounced him to the ground and nuzzled up to him. The poor animal wasn't allowed to see him at all while he was with Gothi, and Toothless was just about ready to break the door down several times.

"I missed you." Toothless said, purring and grumbling loudly.

_"I missed you too bud." _Hiccup rubbed his neck and pressed his forehead to the black hide.

"Careful ye don't open yer stitches. Gothi would kill ye." Merida said, walking/limping up to the two of them.

"Merida! What are you doing? You're not supposed to be walking!" Hiccup ran over to her and tried to push her back in the other direction.

"Well, neither are you." she said, pushing him away. "And besides, ah just needed some fresh air."

Before Hiccup could argue, Toothless ran over to the redhead and started gaining affection from her. She smiled and stroked him as he purred.

"He says you smell nice." Hiccup said as she sat down with the dragon.

She scratched his neck as a thank-you. "Ah almost forgot ye were a dragon whisperer."

He sat down next to her. "Yeah, it doesn't actually seem all too complicated. I was thinking of calling it 'Dragonese'."

She chuckled. "Aye, and ye could write a book on how ta speak it."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, only after I write a book on how to train dragons."

"Or how about learnin' how ta be a pirate?"

"Hey, that is actually a very delicate skill set."

She chuckled for a bit then sighed heavily. "So this is it then. Ah'll be leavin' soon and ye'll be here. Seems like th' opposite of last time."

He sighed. "Or I could come with you. Help you restart the kingdom and such."

She shook her head. "No, ye need ta be here with your people. We both have so much ta fix, we shouldn't waste any time in each other's lands anymore."

Hiccup fell silent. He didn't really want to stay away, especially since he broke his promise for four years already.

"Merida," he said, "have you ever had any thoughts on uniting our people?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Well, aye. An alliance, if that's what yer talkin' about. Ta be honest ah thought we were already allies since we used my men ta come across th' ocean ta save yer people."

"Well, no. I mean yes, but-"

"Wow, you suck at this." Toothless said and he purred.

"What?" Hiccup raised his hands at his friend.

"C'mon, I know what you're getting at."

"Oh, just get out of here!"

The dragon flicked out its tongue before leaping up and waddling away to find someplace comfortable to sleep among all the ice and debris.

Merida giggled at the dragon. "What'd he say this time?"

Hiccup shrugged and inhaled sharply.

"Speakin' of which, how does that work with ye talkin' normal and then 'Dragonese' an' switching between th' two?"

He shrugged again. "I guessâ€¦if I'm trying to communicate with a dragon I speak Dragonese, but if I'm talking to a human I speak normally."

"Well, how can ye talk ta Toothless an' other dragons? Ah saw ye talkin' ta some earlier."

"The Alpha was the one who drank the potion, so I guess since it's able to control so many dragons at once, I am linked with its brain and I can talk to all dragons."

"Convenient. It should be much easier handlin' dragon problems when ye can talk ta dragons now."

"Let's just hope I don't start breathing fire or sprout wings."

The laughed for a bit, but then the silence of the night overcame them again.

"So," started Hiccup, "are you feeling any better?"

"Well, my leg is still throbbin' actually, but-"

"Merida that's not what I meant."

Turning her head, she looked at him and sighed. Nodding she looked back out to the ocean.

"Ah'm alright. Ah still miss them of course, but at least Drago's dead. He can't hurt anyone anymore." She brushed a stray hair out of her face. "Butâ€|ah still feelâ€|emptyâ€|"

Hiccup turned his head with a quizzical look on his face. "What do you mean by that?"

Groaning, she pulled her knees to her chest. "Ah'm goin' home soon. Ah'll become queen, but no matter how many rooms ah go through or corridors ah'll turn, ah'll never see mah family in that house again."

The viking inhaled deeply then took her hand with his good arm. "I could tell you it's going to be okay, that you can move on, but you've already heard all that."

Looking up to him she squeezed his hand hard.

"All I'm going to say," he continued, "is that if you need someone to talk to or cry with, I'm always here."

Being careful not to hurt either of them, she leaned over and rested her head on his shoulder.

"You've changed everything, Hiccup."

"â€|what do you mean?"

"When ye first came to Scotland, ah had no friends, ah couldn't speak ta mah mum, an' ah distanced myself from everyone. When ah pulled ye out of that water, everythin' changed. Ah had a friend, Ah had the best relationship with mah mum than ever before, an' ah had somethin' ta look forward to every day.

"And even now when ye just talk ta me, ye manage ta make me feel better over the fact that mah parents are dead, ye make me laugh again, ye make me smile.

"Ah guess yer just mah element of change."

Leaning up, she pecked him gently on the cheek. "Thank you, Hiccup."

After that she let go of his hand and struggled to get up. Limping, she started to walk away to get some sleep.

Hiccup took a moment to think about what she said, then stood up and faced her.

"You've changed things in my life too, Merida." he said, making her stop and turn.

"If you hadn't pulled me out of that water and taken care of me, I would still hate everyone who called themselves a Scott. If not for you, I would be dead, Drago would be alive, and so many lives would be gone."

He walked over to her. "You're an element of change in my life too, and not just because you saved me, but because you took something from me as well."

His heart began beating fast and his ears were beginning to turn a deep red. He let the last few words linger in the air for a bit, but it only created tension between the two. Then without warning, he pulled her close and pressed his lips to hers.

In an instant, Merida's heart beat faster than ever and her cheeks burned bright red. Her breathing all but stopped and her legs made her feel as though she was about to collapse. Her arms were stiff by her side and her hands trembled while he kissed her tenderly.

When they finally pulled apart both their minds went blank. Wrapping his arms around her, Hiccup pressed his forehead to hers, allowing her wild curls to tickle his face and neck. He wanted nothing more now than to lean down and kiss her again, to prove how much he loved her, butâ€|

"Noâ€|"

Opening his eyes, Hiccup looked at her. Her eyes began to glimmer with tears and she bit on her lip hard before she spoke again.

"I can't." Merida said, shaking her head. "No, no. Ah have to go back to Scotland, and you have ta stay here an' take care of your people."

"But -"

She shook her head more. "No, we can't get distracted by somethin' like this. Our lands are in pieces, our people in shambles. Maybe in th' future butâ€|Ah'm sorry."

Scared and panicked, she pushed away from him and ran as fast as her injured leg could move.

Stunned and broken, Hiccup just stood there in silence as she ran farther and fartherâ€|

Two days later, a fleet left Berk to Scotland. The only viking to go with them was Astrid, since her fiancÃ© was left in their land.

The Chief of Berk watched silently as the boats slipped over the horizon. As they made their way through the water, his mind returned to all the past events he was involved in with that land beyond the water. He thought of the royal family, the MacGuffin people, the terrible tragedy, and the wondrous land. But most of all, he thought of the soon-to-be queen. During the past couple days he thought of what she said, and though he knew she was right, he couldn't help but feel heartbroken.

The sun rose higher and higher and even when the ships were out of sight, Hiccup stayed on the docks. While he stood there a thought came to his head, and reaching inside his shirt he pulled out a silver necklace.

Silently, he smiled to himself. He still had a promise to

keep.

33. Epilogue

****One Year Later****

DunBroch seemed as though it would never reach the full glory of its former days, but under the guidance of Queen Merida and the remaining Lords, the kingdom built itself back up. They tilled the earth and built homes in DunBroch, but no one set foot in the land of MacGuffin again. It came to be known as the Valley of Ashes, and in remembrance of all who died, the people mourned and cried on the anniversary of that terrible night.

The teenage triplets returned their homeland only a few months after their sister began to rebuild the kingdom, and they were welcomed with joyous cries and celebration. Like their sister, the three brothers didn't take well to the news of their parents' deaths, but knowing Merida was the one who killed the man responsible rested their heavy hearts ever so slightly.

One day a small group of ships entered DunBroch's bay. At first the people of Scotland were frightful, but many calmed down once they recognized the dragon symbol on their sails.

The visitors were given permission to port, and soon the news was sent to the royal family.

As men unloaded supplies from the boats to the docks, one certain figure made its way to the castle. As he walked through the streets, he nodded to familiar faces and strangers also. His unusual and metal prosthetic scraped across the stone road while a large, black dragon followed behind him.

When they made it to the gate, the two foreigners were given entry and they finally made it to the throne room.

Inside there were the Lords, military personnel, economists, other people of higher status, and guards lining the room. As the boy and his dragon entered the room, there were a few whispers and gasps at the scaly beast.

But the two paid no attention to the crowd and instead focused on their audience at the end of the room. The Queen sat in her throne with the DunBroch banner hanging proudly behind her. She wore a beautiful, royal blue dress with silver trim and her golden crown shone brightly among her red curls. Her brothers sat in their own individual thrones to her right, and to her left were two empty chairs.

The Queen of DunBroch stood as the visitor bowed deeply to her, and the room went silent as she began to speak.

"Chief Hiccup, what brings you to our lands?"

The man lifted his head and smiled warmly at her. "I came to ask Your Majesty's hand in marriage."

There were a few murmurs floating in the room, but the Queen raised

her hand and the whispered stopped.

"You are not th' first ta ask. What do you have that others do not?"

"We already have a good alliance, Your Highness, but a bond in marriage would bring our different peoples closer together. My village is not the only one filled with vikings in the Archipelago, and by uniting our people together we could be the ultimate example. Also, my people would be better prepared to aid yours in the case of war should any of the other viking clans come to attack again."

Queen Merida nodded. "Are there any other reasons I should consider you?"

Hiccup sighed. "Well, to be frank, I am in love with you and have been since the day you dragged me out of the ocean. And even if you deny me," Reaching into a small pouch, he pulled out a silver necklace. "I hope you accept this as a reminder of our friendship when we were young."

It had a beautiful Celtic design of three bears with weaving lines. Hiccup approached her and with permission, clasped it around her neck. She stood for a moment, looking at the design and remembering everything connected to it. Then she looked back to Hiccup, and quickly grabbed him by the front of his shirt and pulled him in to kiss him.

There were a few gasps from the crowd, but there were also a few chuckles and smiles, knowing this was something Merida would do in a formal court.

Their passionate kiss lasted a good long while, and when they finally took a moment to breathe, the queen hugged the chief close and whispered in his ear,

"Of course ah'll marry you."

****A few weeks laterâ€|****

The wedding was a spectacular sight, and one of the most joyous celebrations since before Drago came to Scotland. Vikings and Scotts of all shapes and sizes filed all over the DunBroch while last minute preparations were made.

Merida sat in her room, watching everyone buzz around while some of the maids begged her to get out of sight. Sitting by the open window, she fingered her mother's crown. Her elegant wedding dress was draped carefully over her bed, but the poor maidservants were pleading her to get away from the window and get ready. It wasn't until a familiar face walked in the room that Merida finally got up.

"Astrid!" she cried, running across the room. Embracing her friend in nothing but her under dress, the girls made the maids shriek and close the door.

"It's good to see you, Merida." Astrid said, accepting her hug.

"Ah was beginning ta think ye weren't goin' ta make it."

"Yeah, Thuggory's dad kept procrastinating our departure. For a while it seemed like we would never leave."

They laughed a bit, but then one of the maids finally took control and forced the queen to put on her corset. Merida held tight to one of the beams on her bed as the maid pulled the corset tighter. While the queen was busy being tortured, Astrid sat on the bed and talked to her friend.

"I have the most exciting news." Astrid said. "Thuggory and I are having a baby!"

Merida smiled. "That's wonderful!" she was about to run and hug Astrid again, but the maid refused to let her move. "Though, excuse me fer not baskin' in excitement. It seems as though someone is tryin' ta break mah ribcage." She let out a wince as the woman pulled on the string.

"I still have no idea why anyone would wear one of those." The viking leaned back, laughing.

When Merida was finally allowed to move free, she hugged Astrid again and during the whole process of getting ready, the viking shared news from Meathead Island.

Finally, the bride was dressed and ready. The main body of her dress was white, though much of the trim and embroidery was blue and gold. A veil was attached to her mother's crown, which sat comfortably on her head. Lastly, the silver necklace rested on her chest, gleaming beautifully in the sunlight.

After giving a last look in the mirror, Merida walked over to a tapestry that hung in the corner. It was the very tapestry she cut with a sword when she was sixteen and thought was the answer to breaking her mother's bear curse. The stitches used to fix it were obvious and rather unfitting, but they were a great reminder to the queen of her past mistakes.

Reaching out, she gently touched the faces of her parents in the tapestry, silently wishing they were there to see her.

Meanwhile, the groom was standing in his room, waiting to be told when everything was ready. He wore clothes similar to his usual flight suit, but he also had a metal chainmail in a dragon scale pattern overtop, and he had a traditional fur cape from Berk resting on his shoulders. He wore a small tunic with the Berk symbol over the chainmail, and on his hips he had a ceremonial sword that had been passed through his family for generations.

After he finished getting dressed, he turned to Toothless and raised his hands.

"How do I look?"

The dragon tilted his head, and then gave a gummy grin. **_"Like you need a haircut."_**

The viking glared at him then ran his fingers through his hair. But no matter how hard he tried, his brown locks stayed as messy as

ever.

"Oh, and I heard from Meatlug." Hiccup said. **_"Don't even think of covering me in your slobber after the ceremony."_**

Toothless groaned. **_"Blabber mouth."_**

Suddenly the door opened and in walked Stoick. His face had plenty of scars from the Battle of Berk, but even after a year many of them had faded.

"Son," said Stoick, closing the door behind him, "you alright?"

"Yeah." Hiccup said.

The old chief looked his son up and down. Reaching out he brushed the fur cloak with his hand.

"I wore this when I married your mother." Big, waterfall tears nearly formed in his eyes, but he blinked them away.

"I'm a lot smaller than you were then."

Stoick chuckled heartily, then opening the door again, led his son outside. It was time for the ceremony.

The throne room was filled with Scotts, Vikings and dragons of every kind. Hiccup was led to the end of the room where the thrones usually sat, but instead a priest stood waiting for him. Hiccup fidgeted in his heavy clothing as he waited, his father and Toothless standing next to him.

Finally the doors opened, the bagpipes began playing, and down the aisle walked the bride. As soon as he saw her, Hiccup's mouth went agape. Merida rarely ever wore any sort of fancy clothing, and the afternoon light shining behind her made her look beautiful beyond belief.

Since her father had long passed, Merida ventured the walk on her own. At first she had a look of nervousness, worried that she might trip or fall on her way. But as she kept walking, she remembered her mother's words and all of the 'useless' princess lessons. Taking a deep breath, she made it the rest of the way smiling.

When she made it there, the music stopped and the priest began speaking. As he spoke, Hiccup drew his ceremonial sword and held it blade-down to Merida. When she took hold of the handle with him, the priest tied a red ribbon around their hands, securing them to the sword and each other. After he finished speaking and the couple made their vows, the priest stepped aside as Stoick took his place.

As a past chief, Stoick had the authority to seal the two in marriage in the traditions of Berk. And once he finished, then the celebrations began.

It was a spectacular sight. Everyone was singing, dancing and being merry together despite cultural differences. Food and drink was passed around, and soon Stoick and Gobber made it to the floor to

sing a drunken duet.

Merida and Hiccup sat at the end of the Great Hall, laughing at everyone and everything. As a joke, the queen tied the ribbon from the priest in her husband's hair, and it flowed gracefully whenever he got up to walk anywhere.

At one point while they were at their table, Merida stood and turned to Hiccup.

"Get up, we're dancin'."

Wide eyed, he shook his head. "Uh, one-legged viking here. Remember?"

"Aye, of course, but that doesn't mean ye can't dance. C'mon!" Grabbing his arm she dragged him to the middle of the floor.

Since he didn't know the dance too well, Hiccup tripped many times over himself, and tried to convince Merida to let him sit down. But eventually, he got the hang of it and the two of them had their first dance as a married couple.

As Merida looked around the room, she saw so many faces. Not a single one was without a smile, and closing her eyes she knew there couldn't be a more perfect moment.

"Merida, is anything wrong?" Hiccup said, and she opened her eyes. She had stopped dancing abruptly and closed her eyes in the middle of the dance floor, so Hiccup naturally assumed something was up.

Smiling, she hugged him close and buried her face in his neck.

"No." she said. "There is absolutely nothing wrong."

* * *

><p>Hey, hiddenwriterspirit here to officially announce that Elements of Change is OVER! Yes, the story is done, but as a bonus I'll be posting an "Author's Comments" to help answer questions and explain why I did certain things as well as possibly some bonus stuff. So ask your questions now before I post it, and I hope you all enjoyed the story! :)

34. Author's Comments

****Author's thoughts:****

****"Hiccup seems lost. Why did he change after he returned home, causing his relationship with Astrid to get ruined? Was it because he has feelings for Merida? But then he wouldn't still have feelings for Astrid. You're tearing up my feels here!"****

Okay, I'll admit, this sort of bothered me. I believe that yes, you can like two people at once. I don't know about loving two people at once, but I think that someone can have a crush on more than one person. Hopefully this will clear things up a bit.

****Relationship Explanations:****

Something I should explain first: During the entire first part, I made it so either MeridaXHiccup or AstridXHiccup could happen. By the time I finished part 1, I still hadn't decided which way to go. So in terms of relationships, everyone is mostly just FRIENDS in all of part one.

After Hiccup got back home, all he thought about was Scotland and Merida. He just spent months there by himself, and now he has to adapt back to normal life. But he never shared his thoughts with anyone, including Astrid. This is where Astrid breaks up with him. Now, I think this was smart for Astrid because it wasn't a "Oh, you're so mean, I hate you." breakup. She found herself in an unhealthy relationship and decided to free herself. Often I see girls who end up in an unhealthy relationship and it almost destroys themâ€¦figuratively. Plus, they stayed friends afterward. Now once she did this, Hiccup realized what he'd been missing while he was focusing on Scotland, and so he tried to do better and even hopefully win Astrid back. He focused on it so much that he completely forgot about Scotland and the promise he made. It also didn't help that he soon became the new chief and all these new duties and responsibilities were thrown at him. And when Astrid and Thuggory got engaged, it hurt him a lot. Astrid was the one girl he really saw himself marrying and spending a lifetime with, so it took a long time to get over. But he doesn't hate Thuggory. In fact, he blesses the marriage and wishes the girl of his dreams the best life she could possibly have.

Now, with Thuggory, I decided to try to give Astrid a happy ending. I honestly didn't see her with Snotlout, so I brought in someone from the books. Thuggory was the one I liked the most from the books who hadn't already been used/adapted. I changed his character, as Dreamworks did for practically every single character, and I tried to make him seem like Hiccup. He was meant to be the perfect man for Astrid. They have common interests and they tease each other with playful banter. To be completely honest, I based their relationship on two of the happiest 'relationships' I've ever been in. I enjoyed myself the most when I took the time to get to know the guy and when we played games and just had fun together. So this is what I put in for Astrid and Thuggory.

Now, I will admit, I almost killed Thuggory off. I was very tempted to, but I realized it wouldn't be contributory to the story, and I really wanted Astrid to have a happy marriage. However, I felt they also needed a challenge in the relationship, so that's why he got injured so badly. Now, I don't know if I described his burns the way I wanted, but they're something he's going to have to live with for his entire life. They'd gotten to the point where either he will feel nothing at all (his nerves had been completely burned) or he will have to live with the pain forever. Once he heals over as much as his body can, he will have to wear something over his scars and burns and he will need special care for the rest of his life. Astrid's going to have to decide if she wants to deal with that forever.

Alright, now we get into Merida. She doesn't know her own emotions. Sometimes people don't realize they like a person till they lose them or it is revealed who that other person likes. In the beginning, she just sees Hiccup as a friend. That's all she really wanted for a long time, anyway. She even supports his relationship with Astrid and was

really surprised when she found out they weren't getting married. Now, there were hints of feelings for him when he left on Toothless, but it was more of a "I just lost my best friend" sort of feeling. It wasn't until he kissed her that she realized she actually thought of him as more than a friend. But alas, she got scared of her own feelings and ran from them. Throughout most of her life she didn't see herself loving or really marrying anyone, so when Hiccup kissed her she became confused and even as she left Berk she was running over her own feelings to see if she truly loved him back. During the year apart, she realizes she does love him and ends up regretting running away from him, and when he comes back and proposes she can't help herself and kisses him in front of everyone.

Cathal MacGuffin almost became a love-interest for Merida, because he was me and my brother's favorite suitor from the original movie. But once again, Merida really just saw him as a friend, and he caught onto that rather quickly. Unfortunately, he is one of the tragedies of the story and ultimately dies.

Why did he die? Not only was his death a parallel to httyd2, but I felt like through such a huge battle, someone close to BOTH Hiccup and Merida needed to die. It was a hard decision, but after going through all the characters, we felt Cathal brought just enough despair to Hiccup, but with killing her mother in the same battle, Merida completely shut down.

Also, I was going to expand more on Cathal's wife and how they met and all the details, but I felt like I was trying to shove too much in. I've already put a bunch of useless fluff in, and I feel like showing that he had someone he loved makes the loss all the more heavy, and the lack of knowledge on who she was, if she's still alive or if she died in the battle really makes his death more bearable. Well, just a fun fact: The woman was a Dingwall girl and she had just given birth to their first child and shown it to her family when Cathal returned to his hometown to help defend it.

Ruffnut and Eret are just complete and utter comedic relief. They made me laugh so much in the movie; I had to put some of it in.

***"Why do you take so much from Merida?"**

From an annotator's point of view, Merida was the embodiment of despair. Through her, I displayed different levels of grief, starting with her kingdom, her father then her mother. With her kingdom, once she saw how devastated it was she broke down, but there was still a glimmer of hope she held onto that maybe some were still alright. When she discovered her father was dead, she focused more on hate and revenge but once her mother died all that turned to sorrow. She felt like she had nothing left to live for. She supposed her brothers were either captured or killed and her entire kingdom had fallen into the hands of a murderer. If Hiccup hadn't been there to prove she had at least one person in her life, she probably would have either been depressed her entire life or committed suicide.

Fun Fact: I was going to give Merida a baby dragon, a Timberjack who had lost its mother to Drago, but it was still so young, it couldn't follow. So Merida took care of it and raised it. But the amount of time needed to take care of it would've taken away from the main plot.

****What happened to the triplets?****

They got captured by pirates but they convinced the entire crew to commit mutiny against the captain and the three of them were named the new captains and they took over the seven seas.

OR

They sailed around endlessly and found a lovely place in the West where they found potatoes and ate them regularly.

OR

They crashed with their crew on a small island where they created a new government based on Marxist Communism then realized the people were getting lazy and established themselves as the new kings of the island. Eventually they got bored and went home.

Bottom Line: It doesn't matter. They do survive and they come back three months after Merida starts to rebuild the kingdom. Each of these scenarios were told to Merida by the triplets, so no one really knows what happened.

****Merida and Hiccup's kids:****

Yes, I planned on adding something to the end of the epilogue talking about their children, but I just got really lazy and left them out.

But soooooo many people have been asking about them, I just might do a bonus scene with them in it.

****Overall Thoughts:****

With only a few words I have the power to build up and completely destroy feels. No one should have this much powerâ€¦ just kidding =)

You know what? This started as just a fun little fanfic with a possibility of shipping Merida with Hiccup. It was completely random in my mind, but then it evolved into this. To be honest, I'm proud of this. This is the ONLY fanfic I have ever completed and it is one of the reasons I started my new DeviantART account. I feel like my writing has definitely improved and who knows, maybe I'll write more in the future. Naw, scratch that, I am DEFINITELY going to write more! Actually, I've already started on two new ones, so stay posted! (yesâ€¦one of them is mericcup)

35. Bonus Chapter

****Expecting****

Hiccup ran to the docks as fast as he could while tripping over himself and the cold snow. His metal prosthetic scraped against the hard wood of the docks and eventually he came to a stop. Trying to look over the side of the newly arrived boats, he stretched his neck as far as it could go. Finally, the one he anticipated hopped gently onto the docks.

"It's good to see you, Merida." Hiccup said as he embraced his wife.

"You too." she said with her arms around his neck.

When they finally let go, a playful Night Fury ran up and snuggled next to her.

"Well hello to you too, Toothless." Merida scratched the top of his head and back of his neck while he hummed softly.

"_**You smell like fish.**_" the dragon said, licking her cheek gently.

"_**But she doesn't have any, and she doesn't need your slime all over her.**_" Hiccup tried to push the dragon's head away, but Toothless just gave him a glare and nipped at Merida's hand.

"_**You're just jealous because I got to kiss her face before you.**_"

"_**Hey, watch it!**_" Hiccup kicked his friend in the leg. In response, the dragon flicked the back of his head with his tail.

Merida just laughed at them and proceeded to walk up the docks. By now she was used to the two of them talking privately to each other, but she was glad they were still playful with one another.

"So how's the kingdom doing?" Hiccup said as they walked.

"Alright. Nothin's changed much, but the winter frost is heavy this year. We may have to wait a bit longer ta start plantin' anything." A chill went down her spine and she pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders.

"Well, we're glad you could be here for Snoggletog." Hiccup put his arms around her, trying to get her a bit warmer as they walked.

"Why is it named Snoggletog again?"

"Believe me, I have no idea."

They kept talking about the winter celebration and what Hiccup had planned during her visit on Berk as they walked up to his house. But before they walked in the door, Merida stopped him.

"Oh, ah have somethin' important ta tell ye." she said.

"Well, let's get you something hot to drink first. You look like you're freezing."

He pushed the door open, and there decorating the inside of the home was Stoick. He was hanging decorative lights and shields up in the rafters, but he nearly fell when the two of them and the dragon walked inside. As soon as he got inside, Toothless found a comfortable spot near the fire.

"Oh! Merida, I didn't know you were here yet." Stoick said as he nailed a shield to the large post.

"Ah only just got in." she said, sitting at the table near the blazing fire, warming her hands. Meanwhile, Hiccup found a kettle and began prepping it.

"Did you have a safe trip?"

"Aye, cloudy skies but good wind. However our captain almost sailed us right into Outcast territory."

Stoick gave a scoff and went back to work. Merida wasn't sure, but she could've sworn he said something like _"Scottish sailors"_ very sarcastically under his breath.

After giving a small chuckle, Merida turned back to her husband. "So, what ah was sayin' beforeâ€|"

"Yeah?" Hiccup said, though most of his attention was focused on trying to find the lid to his kettle. At last he found it.

Merida paused for a bit, but then the anticipation was too much for her to wait.

"â€|I'm pregnantâ€|"

In an instant everyone froze. Hiccup dropped the kettle, but his hands remained in the air. Stoick nearly fell from the rafters again, but he secured himself with his hammer and Toothless' head shot up from the noise the kettle made from hitting the floor.

With just two words Hiccup's mind began to spin like crazy. He tried to break away from his state of shock and respond but no words came out. Eventually he looked to his wife, who gave him a small smile. Again, he tried to speak but all he could gag out was broken words and non-distinguishable sentences. At last, his father saved him by shouting:

"FINALLY!"

****Birthday****

Months later Hiccup found himself pacing through the halls of DunBroch Castle. The midwives assured him everything would be alright and that he ought to get some sleep while the night was still young, but there was no way he could sleep now.

It had already been hours since Merida went into labor, but his nerves just kept building higher and higher. Twice he found himself knocking on the door to the delivery room to ask if everything was alright, but he was just shoved out the door and away from that half of the castle.

With nowhere else to go, Hiccup wandered out the back door and to the stables. While his stomach churned uneasily, he laid down in the hay next to his best friend. Toothless always stayed in the stables, despite Hiccup's request to let him stay inside, and the dragon grunted when the viking disturbed his sleep.

"_**Relax.**"_ The dragon said. _**"I swear, you're worse than Gobber on bath day.**"_

"_**Well, excuse me.**"_ Hiccup put his hands to his face and ran them up through his hair. _**"It's not every day I become a father.**"_

"_**And this is why eggs are so much more manageable. You humans always make everything so much more stressful.**"_

"_**Oh, I'm sorry I didn't write the laws of nature.**"_

After that, the dragon got up, moved a few feet and flopped down on his rider, forbidding him from speaking let alone breathing.

"_**Nnh, get off!**"_ Hiccup huffed, and he tried to lift the heavy body off his chest. But it wasn't until a handmaiden came running into the stables calling for him that the dragon released his captive.

"Oh, Chief Hiccup. You can come and see her now."

Wide-eyed and excited, Hiccup nearly made the poor girl fall over as he ran past, sprinting through the castle halls and rooms. At last, he made it.

Merida was lying on the bed, sweaty and pale with her hair splayed out in all directions, but in her arms lied their firstborn son.

He was pink and squishy-looking, but as Hiccup neared his heart stopped and a great smile crept onto his face. Before he was even close to the bed, Merida smiled and asked,

"Do ye want ta hold him?"

Hiccup nodded slowly, and once he was finally close enough she slipped the child into his arms. He was lighter than Hiccup expected, and his shoulder's stiffened out of fear of dropping him. The baby cooed and whined a bit, but he remained still in his father's arms. After admiring the gentle creation in his arms, Hiccup finally turned to his wife.

"How are you doing?"

"Ah just went through four hours of hell, but ah'm alright. He was all worth it."

"He looks like your dad."

"Ooch, no. He has mah mum's nose, and yer big ears."

He chuckled at her, then looked back down. Carefully he brought his hand up and stroked the boy's cheek before kissing the top of his head.

"So we're naming him Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Fourth right?" Hiccup smiled when he got a small glare from his wife.

"No. We agreed if it was a boy that his name would be Gregor Fergus

Haddock."

"I know." Hiccup chuckled again, and he gave his son another kiss on the forehead before whispering the child's name in its ear.

****A Time of Peace****

Years later a couple slept peacefully together in a cozy corner of a wooden house. It was not even dawn, yet a series of noises echoed through the halls. They were the soft pitter-patters of small feet running through across the wooden floors, and as the chief of Berk heard them approaching, he turned and dug his face in his pillow.

Unfortunately the owner of those feet jumped on the bed and shook his father, bouncing up and down.

"Dad! Get up! C'mon, dad!" Gregor cried.

Groaning, Hiccup rolled over and moaning in his wife's ear, "Your son is talking."

"Before dawn, he's your son." She responded, and pulled the covers over her face.

"Dad! You promised that we could go see more dragons today!"

Hiccup rolled over again, trying to smother his ears with his pillow, but the boy tried a new tactic and started bouncing on his mother instead.

"Mom! Dad won't get up!" he said loudly, and with that Merida took her pillow and smacked her husband with it.

He groaned at the contact, but to the boy's disappointment, he still didn't get up.

A bit defeated, the boy crawled out of the bed, went back to the stairs and called,

"Ellie! Yokol! You wanna jump on daddy?"

"What?" called a sleepy, yet obviously younger voice.

"Hop on pop!"

In a flash, Hiccup's eyes widened more than ever before as he heard two more sets of tiny feet bound down the stair and sprint right for him.

"Wait! No, no hop on pop!" but it was too late. All three children jumped on top of him, and he grunted as the air suddenly left his lungs. They bounced up and down, giggling and laughing as their father struggled to get up.

Finally, he managed to roll over and plant his foot on the cold floor, signifying his defeat.

"Alright, alright. I'm up." He said, and the kids cheered their victory.

Yawning and stretching, he slowly got dressed as the children ran circles around him. Then once he told them to go get ready, the two oldest sprinted back upstairs.

Little Yokol James Haddock jumped back into his parents' bed however, and once he did Merida sat up and cuddled with him.

"Ah suppose there's a lesson ta learn from this." Merida said to her husband as he readjusted his prosthetic.

"Yeah." He said. "They're much stronger united than apart, and hopefully they'll always stay that way."

"Ah was just thinking 'Get up when he first tells ye an' ye won't get clobbered' but yer version works too."

Just then the two other children came back down the stairs, with big, bright smiles on. And despite being in Viking territory, Elinor Val Haddock still wore a long, plain dress from Scotland. Meanwhile Gregor ran up to his father wearing an old shirt of Stoick's, and some newly made trousers.

"You wanna come too, Yokol?" Hiccup said, picking Ellie up in his arms.

But the little three-year old shook his head and snuggled with his mother.

"You go on ahead, we'll catch up later." Merida said, and she smiled as the three of them walked out the door.

Leaning back she brought Yokol closer to her and kissed his forehead, while the little boy played with a strange silver necklace around her neck.

****THE END****

****(for real this time)****

* * *

><p>I swear, there were like, three reviews in a row asking if I could include their kids or do a bonus chapter.

****So you're welcome, but really. This is it now. No more.****

End
file.